

# Motivation

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Matt was perfectly fine living in Mello's shadow, comfortably ensconced in third place, but L just had to shove his ugly letter where it wasn't wanted and undertake the impossible task of getting Matt to give a damn.

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# Prologue

Disclaimer: I'll say it once. I don't own Death Note. Wish I did. But all I own is this fairly original plot bunny. The damn thing wouldn't shut up.

Summary: Matt was perfectly fine living in Mello's shadow, comfortably ensconced in third place, but L just had to shove his ugly letter where it wasn't wanted and undertake the impossible task of getting Matt to give a damn.

Note: This is the first thing I've posted in years. I wouldn't have uploaded even this, but as stated above, the plot bunny was insistent and my hands started typing without me. Sigh... what can you do? Oh, this is shonen-ai. (The M rating is for language) No like, no read. Please be mature.

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## Prologue

"L..."

The young man in question did not stir from his position, crouched over the keyboards of his small array of computers, his eyes riveted on the white-blue glow of the screens. One hand typed steadily at the keys beneath his fingertips while the other hovered near his mouth as he gnawed distractedly on his thumb.

"L..."

The man's toes clenched and unclenched around the loss fabric of his padded computer chair. He bit a little harder than normal at his thumb, but did not once glance away from his computers.

A tired sigh flowed through the air, resting finally in the man's ears.

"You can't avoid the decision forever, L. You *know* you can't. You have to make a choice."

The speaker waited for a moment, sighed again, and turned to leave.

"I know, Watari."

Watari paused, his back to the genius detective he had known and cared for since the man was but a young, obnoxiously brilliant child. Even when his old back ached and his joints protested movements he could once pull off with ease, the famous inventor, Quillish Wammy, never felt as old as when he and L were forced to discuss the complex issue of choosing an heir.

"However, as brilliant as Near is, number one, always beating Mello with ease, he's limited as well. Too unemotional, too disconnected, those are the sorts of qualities that will be an undeniable asset for him, at least until something unexpected comes at him sideways, in a dimension he'll never understand and it kills him. If I chose Near, I'd be killing him."

"Everyone dies eventually, L," Watari intoned gently.

L's eyes were still riveted on the screens before him. "The same is true for Mello. He's brilliant, but he has no control over his emotions. His instincts are superb, meaning that his dangerous gambles are never nearly as impossible as they may seem, but such tactics only need to fail once to fail forever. In the end, the only way to pick either of them would be to pick both. Together, they might be able to overcome their respective deficiencies, flaws and histories, but their utter abhorrence of each other makes such an option completely unfeasible. As you well know, all attempts by the Wammy's House officials to help them overcome this relationship flaw have ended in physical damage to both children.

"But none of that is new information. Is it, my friend?" L ended in the same dry monotone he had begun in.

"L... you need to pick one of them, while your situation is fairly secure right now, that could change at any time and at least one of them should be prepared in case anything... it won't have to be permanent, we can increase the searches for other possible heirs right away."

"I don't know that that will be necessary, Watari," L said, the hand not hovering before his mouth had paused in its incessant typing.

"Whatever do you mean?" the old man asked curiously, turning around to face the back of the genius's head, "None of the other children's scores have changed, have they? Near is still number one, with Mello at a close second."

"You're right," L said, a strange emotion creeping into his usually emotionless voice. "Nothing's changed and that's the problem."

"Explain," Watari encouraged somewhat impatiently.

L's lips curved into the barest hint of a smile around his thumb, "These are human beings, human children that we deal with here, Watari, not machines. Consequently there is error. Every single child in Wammy's House has a rank, but that rank oscillates on a day to day basis, based on the child's skills and motivations in their various classes. Even Mello and Near fluctuate, sometimes Mello is first in one thing or another, though Near almost always destroys any lead the other boy might gain, it still happens. Any given child will swing between several ranking positions, always averaging out in about the same place. This statement holds true for every child in Wammy's House, every child, that is, but one."

Watari frowned, "But according to what you've just told me, that's impossible. Even the dead last child of Wammy's would sometimes be second to last or third to last in at least some areas."

The world's top three detectives nodded his head, "You'd think so, but the numbers don't lie. I've checked every ranking list, every single grade report, and every last test. And Matt is *always* third."

"Matt?" the inventor demanded incredulously.

The detective hummed lightly at that, "Surprising, isn't it? He did a good job of it too; managing something like would require that he be intimately aware of all the strengths and weaknesses, not only of Mello and Near, but also of the children several ranks down from him. His superior hacking skills (one of the few things he hasn't hidden, I suppose) would help a great deal with that, however, the precise calculations and shrewd intuition that would be needed to keep him so firmly entrenched in his position is simply mind boggling."

"And you're sure...?" Watari began tentatively.

"Quite," the genius replied dryly. "Such perfection, shifting easily with the tides of his fellow children and always coming in the same place... things like that simply can't happen by accident. In his own words, I suppose, Matt might say that we've 'been played', so to speak."

"Played? Even if that's true, the boy hardly seems malicious, why would he even bother with such activities, if he was really that capable, he would be number one, not Near. Why waste his time with the Charade?"

L scowled, that was the problem, wasn't it. "Mello," he said, picking up one of his more solid suspiciousness. "He's doing it for Mello, at least in part. Mello is his best friend, but he's a very fickle friend, from what I've been lead to believe. Matt's a smart boy, but considering his history... I'm not surprised that he might choose to do something like this."

"And what exactly do you think that something might be?" the old man prompted.

"Putting his connection with Mello first, before anything, including himself. Meaning," the genius continued, "that he quickly discovered that Mello would have nothing to do with him if he even dreamed of

doing better than Mello, but that if he was anything less than just bellow Mello, he would be too disgusted with his idiocy and uselessness to even bother with him. Given that situation, the twisted child-logic that dominates even Wammy's House prodigies would have lead the boy to the understanding that his friendship with Mello pivoted about the fact that he *must* be third.

"There could of course, be many other explanations, but that is one of the more viable ones that I have been able to come up with."

"If that's true, though, then knowing this makes no difference, does it? The boy obviously has no interest in being L. Even if he is smart enough for the job, who's to say he'd even take it if we offered it to him."

"Not necessarily," L said, his dark eyes boring into one of the side screens and the two images that hung so innocently in cyberspace, "Life is all about perspectives. Matt has known only two such angles in his short life. Perhaps it's time for another. A change of scenery, so to speak, might just provide the right kind of motivation for our 'lazy' genius. And a little bit of motivation, as you well know my friend, can take one to surprising places, don't you think, Watari?"

"It couldn't hurt."

"Oh but it could. It very well could, my friend. But the probability of this working far outweighs the possibility of a spectacular failure. I'm almost eighty percent certain of this." L's toes fidgeted with the loose material of his seat cushion as he explained the basics of his plan. He finished his abbreviated explanation with an offhand, "if you could begin making preparations, Watari, we'll have to move quickly if we want this to have the proper effect on him."

"Right away, L," the old man intoned as he departed to follow up on his charge's requests

"Good," the detective mumbled to himself, his eyes still riveted on the two pictures. The first was of the source of all this excitement,

one little redheaded boy in an odd stripped shirt with tinted goggles strapped over his eyes. The boy was an odd contrast to the other picture, and the two pictures seemed at first to be completely unrelated. But L had searched countless countries and innumerable schools to find that boy. He was the key, L was sure of it. He would change everything.

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So... curious? I hope so. Any guesses as to where this is going? Please tell me what you think; constructive criticism is always appreciated, especially since I wrote this at one o'clock in the morning...



## Chapter 2

This chapter is dedicated to my first two reviewers, phantom-willow217 and Matt FTW. Thank you so much! Here's the next chapter. Be forewarned, you finally get to hear from Matt, but if foul language offends you, you may not appreciate this story very much. Remember, also, that this story will eventually have slashy things going on, so. Please be mature, know what you like and don't like and act accordingly.

Here we go...

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### Chapter 1

Matt shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He hated airplanes. He had only been on one once before in his short life, and although it had taken him to Wammy's and to Mello, his only and best friend, it had still been a miserable experience and he hated the fact that he was being forced to repeat it.

And he was being forced. He was definitely not here by choice, on a thirteen hour long flight to *Japan* of all places. And why, might you ask, was he going to said Asian island?

He had no freakin' idea.

He had been oh so innocently minding his own business (read: hacking top secret government files mercilessly while still managing to easily dominate two separate RPG websites at the same time) when one of the housekeepers had barged into his room (His Room! Private and holy and get the hell out, thank you very much!) and told him with not so much as a by your leave that he had ten minutes to pack up anything he wanted to ever see again and get his butt down to the main entrance. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars.

Well fuck that.

And he'd said as much.

She responded by telling him that he was going whether he wanted to or not and he could choose whether or not he brought along his clothes and "security blankets". Her words, not his. His machines were *not* "security blankets".

And he'd asked WHY he needed to do this.

She told him he was wasting time and that she honestly had no idea.

Angrily, which had surprised the both of them, since he hardly ever cared enough to express such a pointless and exhausting emotion as anger, he had demanded where he was going.

Away, she'd told him. She did not know where or why and couldn't seem to care less that she was tearing his world apart by the seams.

Questioning how long he'd be "away" for was met with an equal amount of ignorance. When he'd demanded to speak to Roger or anyone, really, she'd told him he had five minutes left to get ready and that he'd be sedated if he did not come quietly.

Fuck.

After that he had moved faster than he ever had in his entire life, dismantling and packing up his computers, games and disks in record time. Once his precious possessions were packed, he threw his few other material belongings into the small bag which had been the only thing he had had with him on his arrival at Wammy's so many years ago. In went some clothing, his spare pair of goggles, the ratty little stuffed rabbit that he'd had as long as he could remember, and last but not least, his pictures. At the top of the little stack was one of his favorites: a picture of Mello and him during their first Christmas together, back before they'd known the true purpose

of Wammy's and Mello hadn't yet thrown himself into the impossible task of becoming L.

Mello.

His best friend. His *only* friend, really. Not that he cared that he had only one friend in all the world, one was plenty and all he really needed. Mello, just Mello.

"What about Mello?" He had demanded as he went to grab up his neglected school books, "Is he coming too?"

The housekeeper shrugged, "Not that I know of. And don't bother with those. I understand that that will be taken care of wherever it is that they've decided to send you... There you go, all set? Good. Come along, Matt, it's time to go."

"Wait," he'd demanded still unbelievably angry and terribly confused, "Just like that? Don't I get to say goodbye?"

The woman attempted to pull her features into a remorseful expression, but failed miserably, "I'm afraid there's no time for that; you're already a few minutes late as it is. Now come along, unless of course you'd prefer to make the journey under the influence of tranquilizers?"

Matt shuddered in his uncomfortable seat. He hated the thought of being drugged against his will. The utter loss of control in such a situation... the things people could do and you'd never even...

The twelve year old bit back a wince at the thought, but now that he'd had a chance to cool down (four hours of cool down time in this goddamned flying metal deathtrap, to be exact) he realized that he'd been played. He knew his fear was well documented in his Wammy file, having hacked it years ago and removed the information himself, but he was not stupid enough to think that there weren't hard copies of the information and now, like a freaking noob, he'd been tricked

into leaving without a fight, his tail between his legs like a whipped dog.

And to make matters worse, he still had no idea what was going on, though he did have a destination now. They couldn't have hidden that, not when they had announced it to the entire plane. Japan. Freaking Japan.

He liked Japan just fine, don't misunderstand, after all it was the home of some of the best technology in the world. Computers, programs, games... you name it, they made it and they made it better than almost everyone else. Which was why Japanese was one of the few languages that Wammy's House actually knew that he spoke, they'd be suspicious if he hadn't known it, what with all the games he ordered direct from the country... and so he supposed if they were going to ship him anywhere, that at least they were sending him someplace where they knew he knew the language. But in the end, it all came down to the fact that they were sending him anywhere without giving him any choice at all in the matter that made him so uncharacteristically angry.

Because he'd been fine where he was, for the first time in his miserable life he'd been fine. He'd had a place, a number even, a little niche where he *belonged* ! He had a purpose: help Mello, support Mello, make Mello number one. And sure Mello could be an ass, and the guy was sometimes completely unstable and utterly unpredictable, but he actually cared about Matt. And that was rare. Really, really rare. Most people didn't give a shit about the quiet, awkward redhead, with the stupid goggles and his foot in his mouth. Not that he blamed them, of course. Why would he blame them? He really was wholly uninteresting, completely useless and so unforgivably awkward. Sometimes he wondered why Mello even bothered with him at all... but then he never thought like that for long because then the blond might just wise up and get rid of him and then he'd be alone again... and that was too unbearable to consider.

Not that it mattered now. He was alone now. Mello was kilometers upon kilometers behind him, getting farther away by the moment and

he was going to Japan, of all places, and he might never see his only friend again.

He wanted to cry with frustration. His eyes burned behind his goggles and he felt nauseous. Damn motion sickness. Goddamned plane. He would not cry. He hadn't cried in years, because it was stupid and childish. And besides, to cry about something, you'd actually have to give a damn and he'd put a hell of a lot of effort into not caring about anyone or anything, not even himself. But his stomach was churning and his face was turning green.

The aide that Wammy's House had so kindly provided him in order to stop him from escaping or slitting his wrists in the tiny airplane coffin toilet smiled with feigned kindness plastered across his face and shoved a paper bag into the boy's face.

Matt took one distasteful look at the floral patterned barf bag before grabbing hold of it. He scowled hatefully at the innocent bag for an instant, but then his stomach was in his throat and he was bent over in his seat like a hunchback emptying his lunch into the eyesore of a puke receptacle while tears streamed uncontrollably from his eyes, collecting in uncomfortable pools at the bottom of his goggles.

He came up for air a moment later and shoved the bag into the waiting arms of his obnoxiously pretentious babysitter. Matt cherished the look of disgust the man afforded the innocent bag, but then his stomach was churning again in warning. The redhead automatically snapped up the bag that his stupid aide was already offering. He spent a second cursing whoever's idea this whole debacle had been in the thirteen languages that he was fluent in, but then he was too busy dry heaving into that stupid floral bag to focus on cursing.

He *hated* flying.

How many hours till Japan?

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Well... what do you think? How's Matt's characterization? He's different from some of the other Matts I've read, but then again, since he's never really developed in the series a fanfic writer has a lot of freedom when writing him. In any case, L is sending Matt to Japan. Who saw that coming? I have a pretty good idea where I'm taking this, but since I don't want to be too predictable, I want to hear your impressions. Take some wild guesses; tell me where you think I'm going with this. Who is the mysterious person Matt is supposed to meet? What pairing am I going promote?

While I do appreciate story alerts and story favorings, they really don't tell me anything. I want to hear what you think! It's important to me!

Until next time :)

## Chapter 3

I want to thank everyone who read the last chapter, especially those who reviewed: **.L**, **atomiclint**, **phantom-willow217**, and **xxdreamerzxx** . A special thanks to **.L** (I've never gotten two reviews from the same person in one day before!! You totally rock!) and of course **phantom-willow217**, who was my first reviewer and is consequently a really awesome person.

P.S. I tried to make this chapter a little longer...

Please enjoy...

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## Chapter 2

"Welcome to your new home," his newest attendant (this one was a chubby, balding European in his late forties) announced with a smile that was surprisingly sincere. Matt instantly hated the presumptuous man and hoped that the ignoramus's obvious love of high cholesterol food (grease stains on hands [check], wider than normal girth for that height and body type [check], bag of American style fast food peaking out of his briefcase [check] ) would lead to the man choking to death on a french-fry or, you know, spilling coffee all over his genitals (though Matt internally doubted whether the moron actually had anything of the sort in his pants - a eunuch, perhaps?) which would ultimately lead to him committing suicide via slamming his head into a car window....

"Have you listened to single word I've been saying?" The man was no longer smiling. Good. There was nothing in this situation to smile about.

In all honesty, he hadn't even realized the man had said anything more than his obnoxiously overly enthusiastic "Welcome". He could probably calm the man down with a few submissive placations as he

did on a regular basis when Mello was having one of his snits. Matt had long ago learned to set aside the little dignity he had for the sake of the greater good, namely the peace and quiet of Wammy's House.

But he had just been violently uprooted from the closest thing he'd ever had to a home and forced to spend a horrific thirteen hours on a fucking airplane from hell. He had stopped being passively indifferent many, many hours ago. He was pissed. No, he was beyond pissed. And while Mello was usually the vindictive one, he wasn't here. Fuck that. He would make this man suffer. It would be therapeutic. Or something.

He cocked his head to the side, letting his features slip into an expression of polite disinterest behind his concealing goggles and overgrown red bangs. It was the look that he wore on the rare occasion that he was suicidal enough to question Mello's orders. He waited a long moment before speaking as slowly and deliberately as possible. "You were talking?"

Mat watched, the amusement in his green eyes obscured by the tint of his goggles, as his attendant's face was transformed. His pale skin darkened with unhealthy suddenness to a vibrant shade of fire truck red. The man was incensed. "You should show some respect, boy. Don't expect any pity or any help, you miserable brat," he growled.

Matt was unimpressed. This man's piss fit had nothing on Mello's frequent bouts of PMS. It was undeniably hilarious, though, that he'd gotten the idiot to lose his cool with only three words. It had to be some kind of record. Mello would be proud of him.

God, but he missed him already. How long would he be stuck in this hell hole?

"That all depends on you, young man," the attendant said, appearing to have reigned himself in enough to pretend to be civil, his face was now a fainter rose color... and when exactly had Matt gotten around



to asking that question out loud? Shit. He needed to start paying more attention.

"You have been given a great opportunity," the man continued, oblivious to the death glare Matt was shooting him from beneath his tinted goggles. "Wammy's House has chosen you and you specifically for this exciting immersion program. The possibilities being made available to you here are enormous. So you are obviously expected to take full advantage of all the amazing sights and resources at your disposal..."

Matt tuned the self-important man out and scowled internally as he attempted to sift through the mounds of bull shit being handed to him on a plate and figure out why the hell he was *actually* here. Immersion program? That was a load of shit. This could be about hacking government satellites for personal use... but no, that sort of thing, that if anyone found out about it (not that they would, he never got caught) they would simply slap him on the wrist, offer a few back handed compliments and give him another computer class. He wanted to scream. For the life of him he could not figure out what he had done that was so bad as to land him with such a horrid punishment: a plane ride from hell and indefinite separation from Mello...

That was it!

Matt's eyes widened behind his goggles. They were separating him from Mello! But why? He was Mello's support, his backup. Why on earth would they separate them? His fingers twitched and he wished for one of his games. The mindless repetition always soothed his agitated nerves and kept his fingers busy while helping his sometime hyperactive mind focus. A game would be just the thing to keep him anchored as he tried to puzzle out the adults' bizarre rationale for their most recent inexplicable actions. Maybe they wanted to see how Mello fared by himself. But then why send *him* away and to Japan no less? It didn't make any sense...

"But this won't be a cakewalk, young man," Lord, was that man *still* talking? "The rules are fairly simple though, and I've been told you're a great deal smarter than you appear, so I hope there won't be any problems."

Matt froze. What did that mean? Smarter than he appeared? He was a Wammy kid. He was third in line, after all. That meant something, even if most people never seemed to remember that. Of course he was smart. Why put that in there then? Why make such a painfully obvious statement? Not for the aid's sake, surely?

Matt realized with a sinking feeling in his stomach that the line must have been fed to the attendant with the express purpose of it slipping out in this stupid speech. How incredibly manipulative....How very L. He had never met the guy, of course, but L had spoken to all the orphans once, and that had been enough for Matt to recognize his handy work. L... what did he have to do with this? Why send *that* particular message, unless... unless he - shit! Unless he knew. Unless he figured it out, figured *him* out. And that's why - Matt's mind was moving at a thousand kilometers a second as it dawned on him with rising dread that L must have noticed something, noticed the well hidden pattern that kept Matt entrenched in his perfect niche of third... And that meant...

"First, you will be attending a local high school, one of the best in Japan, actually." High school? The man's announcement temporarily cut through Matt's internal freak out and despite himself, he found himself listening to the damned git, "In order to make the work somewhat challenging you are listed as being fifteen and having skipped a grade. You will be a second year student in class 209C at the prestigious private academy, Daikoku. Your alias will be Matt Greene, an American exchange student. You will be expected to complete all school work promptly and to the best of your ability, but your primary reason for attending will be social. You are to get acquainted with the culture and make friends. Your social skills are one of the few areas in which there is a great deal still to be desired."

What the hell was going on here? Matt kept his face perfectly blank as his mind struggled to process this new information. What the hell was L up to, sending him to high school of all things? There was nothing for him to learn there. He was a Wammy kid, even if he was only third. There had to be some sort of trick, some sort of game...

"This does not; however excuse you from your normal school work," the aid continued. "All of your Wammy's House work will be provided with explicit deadlines. You will observe these deadlines religiously. And of course, you are under no circumstance to contact Wammy's House. That would defeat the point of the entire exercise."

Matt scowled at the final rule. Who the hell did this guy think he was? He was only L's little pawn. And if L thought he could control Matt, rip him from everything he had ever cared about, he had another thing coming. Matt opened his mouth to snarl out just what he thought about this man and his shitty rules, but choked on his own words at the last provision the attendant laid down.

"I was told to stress that failure to comply with any of these rules will of course result in loss of privileges. Starting with your games, then your freedom of movement, then your computers, and ending with loss of personal possessions. Do you understand Matt?"

Matt tensed. His green eyes flashed dangerously behind his goggles. Oh he understood alright. He understood very well, and a thousand times better than this ridiculous stump of a man. L was pulling all the strings and Matt was thoroughly trapped, trussed up like a thanksgiving turkey. "Personal possessions" his ass. This was about Mello. And if Matt didn't play along, L would take all he had left of his best friend. His pictures, the stupid mementos scattered innocently through his belongings... it was all Mello, and L's threat was obvious. Play along like a good dog, or the Mello gets it.

He was stuck.

Fuck.

Heh, that rhymed.

And that was so not helping.

He had no choice but to play by the rules, for now at least. But he'd be damned if he'd let that bastard detective win. He would wait it out, get a feel for what the hell was really going on, and he would find a way out of this. And then he'd go home. Yes. That was what he would do.

Matt hoisted his bags onto his skinny shoulders and shoved past his babysitter without a word. He passed by a tiny but well equipped kitchen and quickly found the small bedroom that was obviously intended for him. How did he know this? His name was written on the door. The bastard was mocking him! Why did Mello worship the guy again?

Matt sighed in annoyance as he entered his room, locking the door behind him. Mello's blind hero worship of a faceless, nameless man was the only aspect of his friend that he'd ever really wanted to change. But Matt was smart enough to know that Mello could never be changed. He was what he was: an unstoppable force of nature. And he loved L.

So why had L picked Matt?

It had to be pretty fucking obvious that Matt wasn't interested. At all.

Not that he was good enough to be L, anyway. He wasn't smart enough. He was an utter moron, actually. Completely useless. L must be smoking some serious shit if he thought Matt had any potential whatsoever.

Yeah, that's it, Matt decided with a smirk as he set about throwing his clothing onto a shelf above his bed and then more carefully, unpacking and setting up his computers. An hour later, Matt curled up on top of his bed, clutching a gameboy in his nervous finger as he surveyed with pride the organized chaos of his electronic

wonderland of wires and screens. He started up his game, still smirking over the lingering mental image of a gothic letter L, tipped on its side, the ground around it littered with pipes and needles and other such drug paraphernalia.

That's definitely it, the redheaded twelve-year-old thought firmly as he tapped away at the buttons of his beloved game. L would have to be fucking high to expect anything at all from Matt. No one ever had before, so why would they start now?

Minutes or hours later, Matt fell asleep, game in hand, completely secure in the knowledge that whatever the hell L was playing at, he would quickly figure out that it was useless. He was a smart guy, supposedly. How long could it really take the greatest detective in the world to figure out that Matt was a useless waste of space only good for following Mello around like a dog and occasionally stopping Wammy's top two students from killing each other?

L would figure it out.

And then Matt could just go home.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face.

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Heh, Matt is kind of a hypocrite, isn't he? But take it from me, there's a huge disconnect between objectively knowing that you're intelligent and subjectively feeling like an incompetent moron.

Well... what do you think? Matt's going to high school. What the hell?

Anyway, from last time it seemed like no one could guess what I'm planning. It was interesting that a lot of people seemed to assume that Matt would be meeting L pretty soon. Tisk, tisk. L's methods are way too convoluted for him to do something so straight forward... but you'll see soon enough what I mean...

I'm really excited that my plot is original enough not to be completely transparent, but I wonder if any of you had that little light bulb go off in your head sometime during this chapter? Any sudden revelations about my plot?

And again, while I'll always appreciate story alerts and story favorings, they don't really tell me anything. Comments, suggestions, critiques... I want to hear what you think! It's important to me!

Until next time

## Chapter 4

Hey guys, sorry this has been so long in coming, but I've been really busy. My sister graduated from grad school and my other sister had a bridal shower and I'm going out of town tomorrow... so I really haven't had a lot of time and it may be a little while before I can sit at a computer long enough to get the next chapter out. It will come out though. I do not plan on abandoning this story any time soon. As compensation for the wait, this chapter is a lot longer than the others.

Oh, and before I forget, I'd like to thank everyone who read the last chapter, especially those who reviewed: **Aeris de Lothlorien**, **mehhdroopyL**, **xxdreamerzxx**, **Shinra'sCrazyTurk**, **Sjezza**, **phantom-willow217** . You all rock! And a special thanks to **Shinra'sCrazyTurk** (who has joined the small ranks of individuals who have been awesome enough to review twice in one day!).

Please enjoy...

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## Chapter 3

The Ignoramus, as Matt had so viciously taken to calling his attendant in his head - he did not actually know the man's name because that would imply that he would be around long enough to need to know such information - had insisted that Matt make a "good impression" at his new school. That was why Matt was where he was now: sitting awkwardly in the back of an empty class room, nearly an hour before school was supposed to begin.

Matt had made a point of speaking as little as possible to the Ignoramus (in the two days between his arrival in Japan and the dreaded first day of school, as he recovered from the jet lag [not that he slept much anyway], he had said less than fifty words to the man), and so despite the fact that he would rather die than be in this

hell hole of a school for any longer than completely necessary, he had gone along with the man's stupidity without a word of protest.

And though he hated to bowing to the whims of such an utter moron, he had decided during his two days of recovery that he would have to set aside what pride he did have in favor getting his emotions back under control. The upheaval of the sudden move to Japan and everything that had followed had shaken him to the core.

Consequently he had been more emotional in the past few days than he had been in his entire life. And he still was, damn it. He was angry and frightened and angry and confused and angry and homesick, and had he mentioned angry? But that was part of L's plan. Maybe. Matt honestly had no idea what L was planning, but he would be damned if he was going to dance to L's tune like some sort of trained monkey. Being overly emotional was like holding up a sign saying "Take Advantage of Me!" Any emotion at all was a liability, really. He had learned that lesson a long, long time ago. And so even if he was still confused and disoriented and scared and so damn angry he couldn't see straight, he wouldn't show it. He wouldn't show anything. He would wear his well worn mask of apathy, and let the world pass him by, leaving him in the dust, where he belonged.

His fingers twitched anxiously, reaching instinctively for his game. The Ignoramus had walked him into the school and led him through the song and dance of finalizing his enrollment to the school - what was this place even called? - and his schedule. The last was very simple. Japanese kids were apparently more than prisoners in an inhumane torture facility, they were also lab rats caged in tiny rooms without any freedom of movement whatsoever. Perhaps this wasn't really a school, but actually some sort of sweatshop. He'd be chained to a table and forced to make cheap five dollar toys that would sell by the millions in America while someone lectured at him in Japanese about the history of the Taika and Hakuchi eras... Or something.

In any case, Greene-kun - as they *insisted* on calling him - was to be in the prestigious and well kept cage of 209 C. He was apparently



going to be in one of the more advanced classes. Whoopee.

That had been enough, really it had. Torture enough to last a life time. But then, *then* the Ignoramus had to go and decide to confiscate his gameboy - *his* gameboy! The bastard had taken it with a smirk, saying that he was here to "make friends" not melt his brain with useless games.

Useless games?!?!?!?!?

His games were *not* useless.

And they were far better company than a bunch of small brained hormonal teenagers.

It had taken all of Matt's will power to stop himself from strangling the Ignoramus then and there. He would have been justified. No jury in the world would have convicted him. Probably.

But he didn't. Because that was what L wanted him to do.

Well, to be fair L most likely didn't want him to asphyxiate a man with the bastard's own entrails. But it was a close thing.

L wanted him to lose his cool. Matt didn't know why, but that had to be the reason for this, for the way everything had been done. The sudden departure, the threats, the hellish plane ride, the obnoxious aids... L wanted him off balance, out of control. That much was obvious, at least. So Matt needed to be in control. It was hard, reigning in the tidal wave of his emotions, but he didn't have a choice. He had to be ready for whatever L was planning.

What he would do, exactly, he had no real idea. But would blow up that bridge when he came to it.

So he had kept his silence and let the attendant have his way. The smug bastard. He hoped the guy's spleen ruptured. It would serve the game stealing jackass right.

Matt scowled as his fingers twitched again. He grabbed up a pencil and opened one of the notebooks the attendant had so *kindly* provided for him to a blank page. Drawing wasn't as good as gaming, but it was a decent enough substitute until he could get his hands on a game. School ended around three o'clock, right? He had no idea. He had never been to a real school before. At Wammy's House he'd had the freedom to do whatever he'd wanted. He could take a class whenever or however he wanted and no one cared as long as he did the work and did it well. Before Wammy's there had been the other orphanages and their poor attempts at edification, but those hadn't been real schools, not by any stretch of the imagination. And before that... well, there certainly hadn't been any education *there*, now had there?

Matt's hand flew across the page, sketching out the computer he was going to build for himself as a reward for putting up with this crap. He let himself be consumed with his drawing and soon he had filled several pages with complex diagrams of several important components of his new machine.

He was about to start another page when he heard something. Was that a giggle? Matt looked up warily from where he was bent protectively over his work in the back of the classroom. The room was still empty. He could not decide if that was a good thing or not. On the one hand it was peaceful without anyone here to bother him, on the other hand, though, the sooner the teenagers showed up, the sooner he could leave.

But what had made that noise? Matt glanced at the clock on the wall. School would be starting in about ten minutes.

Ah, Matt realized. It was a giggle then. The other students were probably arriving now. So much for peace and quiet.

Not that he was used to quiet. He pretty used to nearly continuous noise, actually, what with living in a large house filled to the brim with children and of course Mello. The other children made plenty of noise on their own, but Mello could out do the whole lot of them any

day of the week. The blond haired bombshell produced a near constant stream of sound. Even if he wasn't ranting about Near or rankings or Near or a class or Near or chocolate or Near, which he did at nearly all hours of the day (and sometime night), Mello was the kind of person who never stopped moving. If he wasn't talking then he was pacing or tapping his fingers or crinkling a chocolate bar wrapping in his fingers as he chomped loudly on his favorite treat. Needless to say, Matt (who spent most of his time with said noise box) had become quite adept at tuning out Mello most of the time. And he didn't mind the endless din since it was a constant reminder that he wasn't alone.

He was saved from examining that thought any further by the entrance of a young man. He had short, black hair, glasses and wore charcoal grey colored slacks and a white button down shirt with a red tie and a nifty little light brown jacket.

Matt frowned slightly at the guy's getup. What was up with that? The Ignoramus had left something similar in his room yesterday. Matt had promptly burned it with a lighter he had shoplifted from a corner drugstore in a fit of rebelliousness on the sole occasion that he had dared ventured out of the tiny apartment L was keeping him in. He was wearing a pair of faded blue jeans, a black and white striped long sleeved shirt underneath a black hoodie, and of course, his goggles.

The guy looked startled as he finally noticed that he was not alone. He had already put down his stuff and taken his seat, before doing a painful looking double take. Matt was pretty sure he heard the guy's neck crack. The teen gaped at him. Matt rolled his eyes behind his goggles, but said nothing. The guy fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat, twitching between staring toward the front of the room and glancing back at Matt. Matt decided that the teen wanted to say something but didn't have the guts. That was fine with him. Now that he wasn't alone he could amuse himself by seeing just how much he could agitate a person without saying a single word to them. He proceeded to stare pointedly at his classmate's back. He counted the

number of times the guy twitched: seventeen times in the space of three minutes, but he had to call off the count when he was distracted by the entrance of the next couple of students.

Two girls and a boy entered. This boy was dressed the same as the first, and the girls wore identical navy blue sailor style uniforms. The uniforms reminded Matt vaguely of the outfits that the girls often wore in some of the anime and manga he indulged in from time to time. He had always been more interested in games, though... in part because Mello didn't make nearly as much fun of him for being addicted to those. Matt watched blandly as the students took their seats, stared at him, and then after floundering for a moment in indecision, went back to talking quietly amongst themselves while purposefully not looking in his direction. That was interesting. In England, even at Wammy's, no one would have hesitated to stare at the strange new kid with the geeky looking goggles. Apparently Japan's reputation for civility and politeness was more than just hype.

Matt sighed, while it was an interesting social quirk that kind of behavior was just another painful reminder of just how far he really was from home. What he wouldn't give for someone to laugh in his face and call him a freak. And then to watch Mello beat the shit out of them before dragging Matt off to go raid the kitchen for chocolate. He was used to those sorts of things. He'd rather be hated and noticed than simply ignored.

But then again, if no one talked to him (even to curse him) then he would have an even easier time of keeping control of himself. If no one else cared, then he could follow their example and also not care. He could not care about these stupid teenagers, and this stupid country and the stupid rules and that stupid L and his own stupid self. Yes. He hoped every last one of them suffocated in their dorky, too stiff uniforms.

Matt pushed away his dark thoughts and watched as students began filing in rather quickly. They had every reason to hurry, after all. Why ever would they want to run late for their turn for a little spin on the

good old rack? Ah, don't you just love the smell of well worn, old fashioned medieval torture devices in the morning?

The students tromped in alone or in pairs and sometimes even in trios. The class was about half full by the time that Matt had come to the solid conclusion that there was not one interesting person in the bunch. They were not like the kids at Wammy's or the kids that he had been distantly acquainted with during his run through the various other orphanages of his youth. They were foreign creatures with different looks and different styles and different attitudes. But past their alien exteriors, Matt's trained eye could see that they really weren't so dissimilar to any of the other people he'd seen of the world. Every last one of them was ultimately a callous and shallow individual that Matt could read as easy and as quickly as a children's book.

And he was to be social with these people? He sighed and glanced out the window. What was the point of this? What was L up to?

He was just considering jumping out the window and taking his chance with the paramedics when door to the class room opened once again. Instead of only a few people entering, there was a large group. Either that or it was a trio of very loud young women. Despite himself, Matt couldn't help but look, even though he knew it probably wouldn't be worth the effort.

He immediately noticed that this group was unlike the others he had observed, but then, a blind person would have noticed the discrepancy. The group was mainly girls, all dressed in their little sailor uniforms and converging on some middle point... there was someone in there, Matt realized suddenly as the group began to disperse, with some of the girls reluctantly breaking off from the herd to take their seats. The diffusion of the crowd quickly revealed the focus of the girls' ardor.

Matt straightened in his seat at the sight of him. While the teen was definitely Asian, his looks were surprisingly exotic. He was tall, with soft face, innocent wide brown eyes and neat russet colored locks.

His uniform, which had looked pretentious and ridiculous on all the other males that had passed through the classroom's door, looked as if it were made for him. Not a wrinkle or stain in sight. The charming expression on his face only added to the over all impression of neat, respectable perfection that the teenager seemed to exude.

But that's not what caught Matt's eye. He could care less about such pointless and superficial things.

No what caught his eye was the fact that for all that he was surrounded by a train of fawning females, the guy might as well have been alone. Oh, he smiled charmingly at the appropriate places and responded in an apparently witty manner when expected to their inane chatter... but this guy... he wasn't there. Not really.

It was all in the eyes. And even across the room, Matt could see the truth in those wide brown eyes.

That was why he sat up and paid attention.

Because for all the smiles and charm, for all the masks upon masks that this guy wore with such obvious ease... beneath all the false pretences and feigned warmth, this guy had a look in his eyes that Matt knew all too well. He saw it in the mirror, more often than not. Well, when he bothered to take off his goggles and look, that is.

This guy... this guy who radiated flawlessness and warmth was... empty.

He was...

He was like Matt.

As if sensing his scrutiny, brown eyes turned to glance at him through the crowd. And despite the fact that his every instinct was screaming in warning, Matt met his gaze head on. The teen watched him for a long time; it seemed, not even given Matt's strange

appearance a second glance. A spark of interest flared in the depths of those dead brown eyes and Matt found himself sitting up a little straighter in his chair. For a moment, he thought the guy might come over and talk to him, but before the redhead had any time to consider just how he might react to that or just what he might say to the guy, if he'd say anything at all, the teacher walked through the door, rambling embarrassedly about endless teacher's meeting about important and officious donors and broken coffee machines.

Matt watched with something akin to disappointment as the teen with the hollow eyes finally looked away and took a seat near the window.

Matt bit his lip in irritation as he was forced to suffer through a painful introduction by his nervous wreck of a teacher. She mispronounced his name and attempted to inquire about his lack of uniform, but he refused to say a word and after an awkward silence, she gave up. He was glad. At least someone in this awful place knew when the hell to back down.

The day dragged by. A teacher would come in, attempt to make Matt feel welcome by lauding the fact that he was an exchange student and had "skipped a grade" - they apparently really had no idea that he was actually four years younger than the majority of the class. Then the teacher would proceed to lecture about their given subject for the remaining forty-five minutes of the class. Then the teacher would leave and another would march into his or her place.

The whole thing was intensely boring. First there was History of Asia. All things he had learned ages ago at Wammy's. He spent the entire period drawing... and maybe stealing curious glances at that guy. But the brunet (strange for Japan, right? Was it even natural?) never did anything interesting at all. The guy just stared out the window.

Then there was science. He had hoped they might do something at least slightly interesting, but it was nothing more than simple physics. He did the rotation and torque problems in about ten minutes and got back to drawing. He wasn't the only one being inattentive; he noticed when the teacher started berating one of the other students for not

answering a question. The whole class seemed to be doing everything but studying. Girls whispered vapid gossip under their breath and a couple of guys made faces at each other as they muttered about some girl or another and that another teen was furiously pushing buttons on a poorly hidden gameboy advanced (the lucky bastard).

After science, there was Japanese class. There was no homework so Matt began writing out a program for his new computer. By hand. Yes, he was just that bored. They had a quick break for lunch during which Matt did not once stir from his place in the back of the room even as some of the other students left for who knows where. There were a few close calls, but Matt was exuding a very clear "Fuck off!" signal and no one approached him in the chaos.

He might have considered talking to that guy, the one with those eyes, but just as the other was getting to his feet, the guy was ambushed by his horde of adoring fangirls and dragged off to wherever teen socialites partied in their brief period of lunch time liberty. Matt shrugged off the momentary flash of regret at the missed opportunity. So what if the guy was interesting? The guy was obviously far too busy to bother with a loser like Matt. And besides, interest was not apathy. And his entire strategy depended on him being as completely apathetic as possible.

He did not eat. He hadn't brought a lunch, nor had he had breakfast. That was alright, though. He'd eat dinner tonight. He forgot to eat often enough that this little hunger strike today shouldn't be much of a problem. He kept working on his code. It was almost like having a computer right in front of him. Almost.

Then the class piled back in and he had Global Affairs. They were supposed to write an essay analyzing an important figure in World Politics. Matt paused in his code writing long enough to spin out a quick handwritten four page paper on the world's number one detective, criticizing the man for his utter selfishness and laying the world's problems solely at that damn letter's feet. He felt somewhat lighter after that and supposed that essay writing could be pretty



cathartic in the right circumstances. He'd feel even better, though, if he got an A.

After that, he had English. Being fluent, the class was rather redundant for Matt, but thankfully the teacher did not even try to make him to speak his "native tongue" for the class like some kind of sideshow freak. But then there was math. It wasn't even hard math, just simple calculus that he could do in his sleep. That hadn't been the problem. No, the problem was the surprise "pop-quiz" that the teacher decided to spring on his class.

The class groaned loudly at the news. The teacher laughed at their misery as though it was the funniest thing he'd seen in ages.

"Now, now class, settle down." Shirami-sensei said. "I'll pass out the quizzes. You have the entire rest of the period to complete them. Take your time and bring your test up when you're done," He explained as he walked down the rows of desks, handing out quiz papers to each student he passed. He paused in front of Matt and frowned thoughtfully.

"I forgot about you, Greene-kun," he said, sounding half apologetic and half annoyed. "As it is your first day, you don't have to take the quiz with the rest of the class. You will however have to make it up before..."

Matt could feel the stares of the other students glaring hatefully at him for his luck at getting out of the stupid quiz. He didn't really care what they thought of him. Actually it might be easier to focus on withstanding L's methods if they all hated him... but at the same time, it really would be a hassle to take the stupid test later when he could just take it now.

Matt grabbed a test copy right out of the teacher's hand. He didn't look up but he guessed that the teacher was probably pretty miffed at his rude behavior. Whatever.

At Wammy's everyone waited for everyone else to get their test and then began... and finished as fast as humanly possibly. Since everyone here seemed to be waiting to begin as one too, he figured that this school ran tests the same way. So he waited patiently for the teacher's signal, and then began.

The quiz was easy. Really easy. But L would notice something if he got anything less than a perfect on such an elementary test. So he rushed through. Finding derivatives and anti-derivatives with ease. He was finished in just less than eight minutes. Mello probably would have finished faster, or Near. But he was satisfied anyway, he usually had to take a lot longer on his tests to make sure things came out the way they should. It was sort of nice not to have to care about that for once.

Not bothering to check his answers, they were all correct, Matt levered himself out of his seat for the first time in several hours and made his way to the front of the room. As he went, he could feel the eyes of all the other students burning into him. He was the first one done, he realized with a frown. That was new. That guy, the one by the window, the one with the eyes, even he glanced at him for a moment before refocusing back to his own test in that, the very picture of perfection.

Even the teacher was looking at him funny, or rather, angrily.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Shirami-sensei demanded when Matt handed over his paper. Matt simply gave him a blank look. "There's no way you're finished. If you don't understand, just say so. Since you took the quiz, there's nothing I can do, you'll have to fail. But you're new so I can arrange some extra credit...."

Matt scowled internally, while still keeping his face blank. What the hell was wrong with this guy? No one had ever questioned his decision to turn in a test before. Usually they were irritated about him taking so long. And was the teacher still talking at him? How useless. He'd have to say something.

"I'm finished," Matt said simply. His words cut through the teacher's rant like a knife, leaving the man gaping like a fish at Matt's back as he made his way back to his desk. On the way back, he found the whole class still staring at him. Some looked annoyed and some looked amused... but the only eyes he really noticed at all were the dead eyes of the boy at the window. Those eyes met his, and even through his goggles, Matt felt the weight of this teen's stare like a boulder being rested on his shoulders. Those eyes were weighing him, judging him. And unlike all the other judging and staring eyes that Matt had encountered that day... he found, that for the first time, he actually might care what this guy thought about him.

Weird.

But then the moment was over and that guy was back to working on his quiz and Matt was sitting at his desk, working on the code for that program he was thinking about writing. Another ten minutes passed before students started turning in their papers. Matt didn't look up.

Math class was followed by what was essentially a class in morality. No, really. They talked about the value of citizenship and the importance of being a good person and of following the law. Matt really had to work at not gauging his eyes out with his pencil. He had never been so tempted to throw himself off the side of a building, but he was pretty close to going through with it by the time the class was over. Would he really have to do this again, tomorrow?

Fuck.

Fuck this. Fuck L. Fuck everything.

The bell rang and Matt was the first out of the room. He wasn't going to stick around for anyone or anything (he didn't even glance at the window as he was going). The entire day had been a spectacular waste of time that could have been spent doing something interesting, like playing Kingdom Hearts on his PS2 or that new Pokemon game on his gameboy or even hacking into some government agency or another.

And what was worse: he had to walk home. He had to be outside, melted under a blazing sun and crushed in the endless foot traffic of the Japanese streets. It sucked. But he didn't have a choice. To quote the Ignoramus "exercise is good for you, Matt." The miserable bastard. Matt was not built for such strenuous activity. He wasn't! Making him walk was almost crueler than the decision to send him to high school. Almost. But nothing could beat the sadism inherent in that decision.

After a grueling walk, Matt arrived back at his apartment. His aid was no where to be found. What he found instead was the fixings for a simple, but surprisingly healthy meal, and a pile of books. He took care of the food first. He wasn't a great cook, but he could muddle through well enough to manage not to kill himself by accident. (Because if and when he went about killing himself it would certainly not be an accident)

Then he looked at the books. On top of the stack as a slim piece of paper on which was printed an extensive list of assignments that were apparently all due by the next morning at six o'clock sharp.

Shit.

He would have to get started now if he had any hope of finishing all of this in a single night. Since it would be a hassle to move the machines in his room enough to make room for the monster pile of books, Matt set up shop in the entry way. He settled down on the surprisingly comfortable carpet, thanked the nonexistent deity that Mello sometimes babbled about for the Ignoramus's blessed absence, pulled the book at the top of the pile open in his arms and got to work.

It took even longer than he had expected to get through all the work. There was about twenty percent more work here than Wammy's usually gave him and the assignments were a lot harder and way more convoluted than usual. But he still managed well enough. He had been doing this long enough to know which questions Near would get right, and which ones Mello would get right, as well as

what Doon (4th) and Vitoria (5th) would get right. From there it was a simple matter of adjusting his score to come out in the right place - in the rather large gap between Mello and Doon. All the same, it took him nine hours to make his way through the extensive pile of work, rather than his usual average time of six hours and forty five minutes. Mello always made fun of him for taking so long on his work, when they both knew he'd rather be gaming, but Matt bore his friend's ribbing patiently. Mello was his best friend, and so missing gaming time to help him out, even if Mello didn't know about it, was time well spent.

Matt sighed and sat up. He piled up his books and assignments on the kitchen counter where whoever was in charge of such things could come and get it. He hated going along with the stupidity of this set up, but he wasn't about to lose his computers or pictures over something he couldn't control. Besides, even if he was far away from home now, that might not always be true. And if - *when* - he went back, he had to be sure he was still in place to help Mello. He had to be third.

He stretched languidly and made his way to his room. He was surprisingly tired, but he wasn't sure if it was from the intense home work he'd just gone through or from being surrounded by strangers all day. Perhaps it was something of both... He curled up in his bed, not bothering to pull down the sheets. He reached for his game but didn't bother turning it on. He held the game close to his chest and stared up at the ceiling of his room, a distant look on his face.

He thought of Wammy's. He wondered how Mello was doing without him. Probably fine. It was Mello, after all. He wondered if Mello missed him. Maybe. Maybe he threw a tantrum and destroyed his room and beat the shit out of Near and they were already planning on bringing Matt home so he could put a stop to it. Or maybe Mello was organizing a rescue party at that very moment and any minute now he would charge in and save the day...

Yeah, because that was going to happen.

Matt sighed.

He wondered if anyone but Mello even noticed that he was gone. Probably not. But if they did, what would Roger tell them? Did he really think any Wammy child would believe that bullshit about cultural enrichment?

On a whim, Matt pulled off his goggles. The light of the room stung his sensitive eyes, but he was too lazy to go turn the lights off. Thoughtfully, Matt ran his fingers over his face. He had such a boring face, really. He was very plain looking. Not like Mello, who for all his craziness, was truly very good looking. Not like that guy at school, with his exotic looks and warm smile. But those eyes... that guy had really interesting eyes, didn't he? They were so bored... so distant... why? Matt couldn't help but wonder.

As Matt drifted off to sleep the question lurked in the corner of his mind.

Who was that guy?

And why the hell did Matt give a damn?

But those eyes... those beautiful, hollow eyes...

Despite himself, Matt was... curious.

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Whew... that was long. How was it? Who on earth is that guy who managed to earn Matt's interest so abruptly? And was Matt still in character? I've been really worried about that. Matt's supposed to have calmed down a bit in this chapter, and I think he did, but he's a lot harder to write when he's being his normal apathetic self... did I do alright?

Almost everyone who reviewed guessed right about what I was planning in this chapter. So you guys probably know exactly who "that guy" is. It's not too obvious, is it?

But regardless of that, what are L's real intentions in putting together this whole charade? What is he trying to accomplish? Will he succeed? Or will Matt figure it out first and rebel? Will he even want to at that point?

What do you think?

And again, while I'll always appreciate story alerts and story favorings, they don't really tell me anything. Comments, suggestions, critiques... I love to hear from you guys! It's important to me!

Until next time

## Chapter 5

Hi guys, sorry it took so long for this to come out, but I've been super busy. But don't worry; I still don't intend to abandon this story. I like it too much, you see.

I'd really like to thank all of my reviewers from the last chapter: **Shinra'sCrazyTurk**, **Sjezza**, **Deal-wit-it**, **phantom-willow217**, **xxdreamerzxx**, and "A hooked reader". I love you all!!!

And to "a hooked reader", I couldn't reply to you since sent an anonymous review. Thank you so much for reviewing! I'm glad you're really into this fic. I know how it feels to go to the bottom of the page and be really disappointed when there isn't another chapter. I hope you like this new chapter!

Please enjoy...

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## Chapter 4

Gym.

Bloody. Fucking. Gym.

Why oh why did it have to be gym? Matt groused internally, struggling to keep his face properly apathetic as he slunk into the locker rooms. He had been excused from physical education the day before because it was his first day, but as he was now beginning Day Two of his lovely little excursion into the hell dimension known as high school, he was no longer exempt from such things.

There was even a uniform.

A uniform composed of baby blue short shorts and a white t-shirt.

Really.



And that was where Matt put his foot down. He had hacked into the school's computers just this morning (it had been depressingly simple to do so, no challenge whatsoever) and added to the suspiciously barren file about himself that he burned easily in the sun and had ultra sensitive skin and eyes. He added an important side note to the file stating that Matt Greene would of course be allowed an alternate uniform for activities that required him to leave the safe cover of the building. The alternate "uniform" was simply the outfit he had worn to work out with at Wammy's.

Wammy's House was surprisingly big on physical education. Even Near had been forced through a rigorous physical regimen, and though the kid had fought it every step of the way, he hadn't had a choice. In order to be the next L you needed to be able to run a several miles in one go, know how to use several weapons and know three to seven different types of self defense. That was a minimum.

Matt had also fought them every step of the way. He hated going outside and physical activity was totally unappealing to him. But as he quickly realized, failing gym would lower his scores, and that would mean losing third to Doon (who loved any kind of physical activity) and that was simply unacceptable. He had, however, drawn the line at wearing anything even remotely revealing. The ever accommodating Wammy's House had gladly provided him with long thin black work out pants and a thin long sleeved black and white striped workout shirt. After that, he shut his mouth and followed Mello's lead like a good dog. It was what he did best, after all.

So that was the outfit he had tucked under his arm as he stole past the rows of lockers and chatting males until he finally found the bathrooms. Matt darted into one of the stalls and locked the door firmly behind him. He could hardly care less that anyone who saw him probably thought he was some kind of girly boy who was too body shy to change in front of his ever so manly peers.

Other people's opinions meant next to nothing to him... well, opinions like that at least. If he changed out there though, the

ramifications would be even more far reaching than the cruelty of a couple of hormonally imbalanced teenagers.

Matt pulled off his hoody and shirt and glanced down at himself. He grimaced at his pasty white skin and too thin body. His eyes automatically darted back and forth, cataloguing the already well known and long faded scars that crisscrossed his body like some demented form of modern art. His gaze lingered on the only fresh wounds on his body: the hand shaped bruise on his right wrist and the ugly wall shaped bruise on his left side.

It would be very inconvenient if anyone saw his bruises, after all, with wounds like that it would be all too easy for them jump to the wrong conclusions. Well not them, really, the students and teachers would have no idea what to make of the wounds except to blame child abuse, but L knew that Matt hadn't been any kind of situation like that for a long, long time. If anyone saw those and word got back to L (and it would, because L had eyes and ears everywhere, the bastard) the detective would follow the evidence to the worst possible conclusion. L was just stupid like that. L would deduce that Mello (for he was the only one who could have done it) had gotten angry and thrown Matt across the room a few days ago in a fit of anger and then he might really never let Matt see Mello again. He would think he was doing Matt a favor (and a favor to himself, too, the selfish jackass letter) but he wouldn't be. Because while Mello really had thrown him at a wall and while it really had hurt so badly that he nearly blacked out, Matt didn't care. Mello was his best friend, after all, and he hadn't meant to hurt Matt. He had just lost control for a bit. He had apologized afterward (in his own way) and everything. He had even gotten Matt some ice and shared some of his precious chocolate with him. So it wasn't a big deal. Really. And it didn't even happen all that often. Just a couple times a month. Barely ever.

Besides, he thought, offering his array of faded scars a wry smile, he had endured far worse than a few mild bouts of fury in the past. A

few bruises were a small price to pay for real friendship. And there was little that Matt wouldn't do for *that* .

The prattle from the other students dulled to a low murmur and Matt realized with some annoyance that he was running out of time. While personally he had no problem with just skipping the class altogether, the Ignoramus would never let him get away with it without Consequences of the game stealing, burning Mello's picture variety. He had to go to class.

Matt shucked off the rest of his clothes and pulled on his Wammy's gym outfit. He readjusted his goggles, grabbed his normal outfit and exited the stall. He spared a glance at himself in the mirror, admiring the fact that *his* outfit was a thousand times more bearable, comfortable and concealing than the normal school gym uniform. Matt stowed his clothes in a locker and quietly followed the few remaining stragglers out to the field.

The field was pristine with fine well groomed green grass and a clean cut, clearly marked dirt track. Wammy's facilities were still nicer though. Maybe he should set fire to the grass or flood the field after school, just to prove his point. It was something Mello might do, but Matt wasn't Mello. He didn't particularly want to be either; Mello was his best friend. Imitating him would be more of an insult than a complement. After all, Mello would see it as an infringement upon his personality... or something. Besides, then he'd have to stick around after school. Here, in this hellhole. No thanks. But it was still an appealing idea.

Matt took a seat with the others on the metal bleachers. He sat on the very edge as far away from the other students as he could without drawing undue attention to himself. Already bored with the situation, he closed his eyes and opened his ears. Well, not literally. But he stopped ignoring the teenagers arrayed about the bleachers. Instead he listened to their jumbled chatter, his brain easily separating and sorting the separate voices into individual people and conversations. While there was little in the way of content in their shallow drivel, it was mildly entertaining to keep track of each

separate conversation and analyze each teenager, all at the same time.

While he listened, girls twittered about crushes and boyfriends and hot celebrities and guys boasted loudly about girls, sports, girls, video games, girls, comics and oh, did he mention girls? How pointless. Why was here again? Oh, right, L. That was why he was trapped in this awful place, listening to this unadulterated, condensed drivel. He had better things to do with his life, like play video games or hack into the CIA's private computer files (that was always good for a few laughs). But no. He was here. Because of him. Fuck.

From the number of speakers, Matt calculated that nearly his entire class of was present. There was only one voice he hadn't heard, but that was because he had not heard the other speak yesterday. He had seen him speak of course, but there had been too much ambient noise and Matt hadn't really been paying attention to his voice, he had been far too preoccupied with his eyes.

All the same, since Matt hadn't seen him when he approached the field, the result was that he didn't know where the only teen he was even remotely interested in actually was. He wondered if the bronze eyed youth was skipping. No. That was highly unlikely. There was less than a one percent chance of that being true. The teen was perfect, or did a good job of acting perfect and someone like that would never risk his flawless visage over something as trivial as a tardy or an unexcused absence.

So where was he?

And why did Matt care?

Care? He didn't care. It was just curiosity. Something to think about, to pass the time and all that. It was like the games he and Mello would play when they were bored. Just amusing little diversions like taking bets on which child would break down under the pressure that week and tormenting Near.

Not that Matt had anything against Near. He didn't really have anything against anyone, actually. That would imply that he gave a damn. And he was Matt: Mello's utterly apathetic sidekick who definitely could care less about anything. But Mello hated Near, so Matt went along with it and only ever put a stop to it when he could tell the tormenting was about to turn into something else... His fading bruises were a souvenir of one such occasion. Not that Near realized what Matt shielded him from. But that was for the best. It might give the fragile kid the wrong idea... besides, word might get back to the adults and L, and well, that could never end well.

Matt's sensitive ears picked out the soft whisper of gym shoes on the springy green grass, coming though, from the opposite direction he and the other students had come from. Reluctantly, the redhead opened his eyes. There, across the field, was an older guy who looked, Matt decided, like an odd cross between a drill sergeant and an escaped convict. The convict impression part could be due to his orange sport coat, bald head and half hidden tattoos, or it could be that Matt was simply paranoid and the man was a completely normal, decent human being and not a fugitive sociopath that had killed their actual teacher and had taken his place so as to better hide from the police and then kill a small class of semi-innocent teenagers. Or maybe... but he lost track of that thought as he caught sight of the young man walking beside the teacher, smiling politely and gesturing intelligently with his hands as he made one point or another to the adult.

What were they talking about? Tennis? How strange. But Matt was less concerned about what they were talking about as opposed to the actual voices that were speaking. So that was what that guy sounded like. He had a nice voice, Matt decided, warm and pleasant and light. He wondered if the teen's voice was a mask too, just like his face and demeanor. Was this guy just a shell of perfection, filled with nothingness that no one, no one except Matt, seemed to even notice was there? Maybe...

Why did he care again?

Oh, that's right. He didn't. He couldn't have been farther from caring. Really.

Really, really.

He sighed in annoyance, but before he could properly rid himself of the thought, convict-teacher-man was clearing his throat pointedly while shooing the teen beside him over to the stands. The empty eyed brunette did as he was told with a polite smile on his face. The visage of perfection only faltered once, when the boy's dull eyes met Matt's through tinted lenses. For an instant, the perfection seemed to shatter, leaving only blazing curiosity and blinding intelligence that threatened to consume everyone and everything in its path, running over him and through him and...

But then the teen was moving past him, the picture of faultlessness, and the bizarre feeling was gone like it had never been. Perhaps he had hallucinated the feeling? It was possible. He hadn't been sleeping, nor eating enough... that could cause all sorts of delirious visions, but then again, he never ate well or slept enough on a regular basis, and he'd never hallucinated something like that before. So it wasn't a hallucination. Was it?"

Matt bit back a sigh of annoyance. Why was he wasting so much thought on this? He really shouldn't...

"Alright boys and girls," Convict-sensei called, interrupting Matt's delicate thought process. "Today is the last day of track and field. Tomorrow, we'll start our next unit. Tennis. Yagami-kun has been kind enough to offer his assistance, considering his experience with the game and despite his unfortunate withdrawal from the sport." The other students started chattering excitedly at this news. Matt scowled. Yagami-kun? Who was that? Matt glanced halfheartedly over at the small sea of other students, but quickly decided that it really didn't matter, especially since it probably had nothing to do with the one thing in this place that actually was interesting, namely, that still unnamed teenager.

"Quiet... QUIET!" Convict-sensei bellowed, silencing the blathering mass of teendom. "Also, we have a new student: Greene Matto. Well Greene-kun, please stand."

Matt's face twitched slightly at the request, but he stood despite the small voice screaming in the back of his head that he needed to start running, *now*, before this crazy man decided to split him in two like a wishbone.

"Where is your uniform, Greene-kun?" the teacher (was he really their teacher?) demanded after a moment of surprise, "And what's with those specs? Those are hardly regulation."

Matt said nothing. He simply stood still and stared past Mr. Convict-man's head at the tiny scoreboard on the other side of the field.

"Well? Greene-kun, I don't know what they teach you brats in America, but here we have expectations and if a teacher asks you a question, you answer it. And if a teacher gives you an order, you do it. Do you understand?" He took Matt's silence for an agreement. "Where is your uniform?"

Matt sighed internally. It looked like he'd *have* to talk to now. Well, at least he could have some fun at the bastard's expense; L wouldn't punish him for that, would he? The world's greatest detective seemed like the type to enjoy fucking with other people's minds just for the hell of it. In fact, he'd probably approve.

"I'm wearing my uniform, *Convict-* -sensei" he said in heavily American accented Japanese. The entire class, who had all heard his perfect Kanto-accent as he spoke fluent Japanese the day before giggled and chuckled amongst themselves (though a few simply stared rudely at him in confusion), but the sparse few that new English well enough were outright laughing at Matt's nickname for their gym teacher. Matt didn't have to look to know that the interesting teen understood his ploy and was struggling valiantly not to laugh and ruin his model student façade.

The teacher growled like a wild animal. "Speak Japanese! And that is *not* a regulation school uniform!" he snarled angrily.

"Actually," a smooth voice interrupted Matt's planned response (which would hopefully insight the instructor to homicide so that Matt could escape in the ensuing chaos), "Otoharada-sensei, Greene-kun has been given special provision by the school board to wear a separate uniform for medical reasons."

Matt's head whipped around sharply to stare across the bobbing heads of the other students to gaze at the perfect shell of the boy with empty eyes. That guy... the only way he could know that was if he had hacked into Matt's school file, himself. A simple feat in and of itself, it did however reveal that there really was more to model-student-boy than he let on. After all, hacking into the school's files was against the rules

"Is that so, Yagami-kun?"

Yagami-kun? So that guy was Yagami-kun? Well at least now he had something to call the guy other than "that guy". But was that really such a good thing? Yes. No... well, probably not.

"Yes sir."

"And how would *you* know that, Yagami-kun?"

"Shirami-sensei asked me to show Greene-kun around and help him get adjusted to the school. His Japanese is quite good, but in order to prevent any misunderstandings sensei asked that I make any necessary explanations to help ease Greene-kun's assimilation into our school," Yagami-kun explained easily, the very picture of deference.

He's a brilliant liar, Matt noted, impressed despite himself. He glanced at the teen's face out of the corner of his eye, all the while keeping his face utterly blank. If he didn't know better he'd believe every word coming out of Yagami-kun's deceptive little mouth.



"Ah," understanding lit up in convict-sensei's dumb eyes, "I understand. You are a model student, Yagami-kun. Thank you for looking out for your peers." The man smiled a smile probably meant to be appreciative but which ended up looking only semi-murderous, spared a hate filled glance at Matt, and then turned his attention back to the rest of the students. "Now that that's out of the way... SIT DOWN GREENE-KUN!" the man shouted.

Matt, who had remained standing for the teacher's little discussion with Yagami, gave the man a vacant look and resumed his seat as slowly as humanly possible. The red faced teacher watched his every move until Matt's butt finally made contact with the bench. Unfortunately, the man apparently decided to let that particular instance of impudence go and turned back to his other, more normal and obedient students.

"As I was saying, today is the last day of track and field. To celebrate this sad, sad day, we are going to run the twelve minute run. Anyone who runs less than six laps will run the run again and again until they do. Understand?" Convict-sensei intoned menacingly at the students.

Twelve minutes? Why twelve minutes? Why not thirteen minutes or even ten? What was so special about twelve? Was it a religious thing? No. That was ridiculous. Maybe there was a study done on running teenagers into early graves and the best results came at twelve minute intervals...

"But first," the teacher called over the groans and complaints of the other students, "warm-ups! Get to stretching!"

Matt, blank faced as ever, followed his classmates over to a small patch of grass. Much to his confusion, they made a circle and proceeded to stretch (poorly) in unison. The entire thing was entirely baffling to the redhead. At Wammy's each child's workout routine was carefully personalized to his or her needs. This... this hodgepodge of stretches was practically useless. A large part of him wanted to just do his normal warm-up routine and have done with

it... but that would make him stand out even more than he already did. If he were Mello, he would do it without hesitation... but he wasn't Mello. He didn't want to be noticed. He just wanted to be left alone.

And to do that, he had to blend in. He had to follow this utterly pointless regimen.

He sighed and copied the other children like the good dog that he was. He really would do anything to be left alone, after all.

And then, after busily contemplating ways to murder Mr. Convict-Teacher-Man (the one responsible for the entire workout) with a rusty spork (there were so many delightful methods: evisceration, decapitation, dismemberment, castration...), they were lining up for the run on the well groomed quarter mile track. The teacher set up the timer and counted down for the students, "Three, Two, One, GO!"

The students shot off: some all out ran, some jogged slowly and a small gaggle of girls walked at a halfheartedly brisk pace as they whispered absordedly amongst themselves. The students were all intent on not being forced to repeat this awful exercise, well all of them that is, but one.

"Greene-kun!" shouted the man Matt was sure was convict disguised as a teacher, "What is the meaning of this? MOVE! Run, damn you!"

Because there, only a few feet past the starting point was Matt, shuffling along, eyes glued to the ground, deaf to the increasingly murderous threats of the gym teacher.

The timer sped on, seconds slipping away like sands in an hour glass as the other students lapped Matt, once, twice... His over active brain automatically kept track of who was where and with how many laps. But that was only because old habits really do die hard. He doubted if he could ever do anything without the now instinctive

calculations for how to come out third best running insistently through his mind. Not that that was a bad thing, of course.

The teacher called that the time was half over. There were six minutes remaining.

Matt still had another half of the track to cover before he was finished with his second lap. The bald headed man seemed to have given up screaming obscenities at him. He had probably already resigned himself to repeating this silly exercise for weeks while Matt stubbornly shambled around the track as slowly as humanly possible. Poor guy. Matt almost felt sorry for him. Almost. In the end, he couldn't dismiss the dark hope that his upcoming performance would shock the man (who may or may not be a crazy escaped killer in disguise) into cardiac arrest. Or something. It's not as though you could actually give someone a heart attack just by thinking about it, could you? No. That was just ridiculous. Ridiculous and impossible.

The redhead finally shuffled over to the line, officially finishing his second lap. If he had the times calculated right, he should have just less than five minutes remaining. Plenty of time.

That thought in mind, Matt's entire demeanor shifted. He set aside his bored apathy and straightened out his body and then, without further ado, he was off. *Running* .

At Wammy's House they rarely ran short runs like this. Instead, they ran seemingly endless runs around the orphanage's grounds once every two weeks and medium sized runs twice a week. But as much as he hated physical activity of any sort, after a few years of the grueling exercise, he found himself looking forward to the long mindless runs when he could turn off his mind and focus on nothing more than the ground beneath his feet and air rushing in and out of his lungs.

And now, in spite of everything that had happened, he felt the same ease coming over him as he raced at full speed around the track. He ran with his eyes closed, imagining he was on one of those

horrendous two hour long runs with Mello sprinting along just a few steps in front of his (always just out of reach), with Doon lagging not far behind and Vitoria and Near bringing up the rear (Near always made up for his rather lackluster gym scores with phenomenal scores in everything else, so since he did actually *try* not to utterly fail, his lack of physical prowess almost never affected his first place position - this was one of Mello's favorite points of contention when it came to the white haired boy). Matt ran and ran. It was like being home again. Run, run, run. One lap, two laps, three laps...

He was almost there, almost done. He could feel it. He opened his eyes, half expecting to see Mello's long blonde hair shining in the sunlight just a few steps in front of him. But instead of blonde, he saw bronze. It was that guy... Yagami running on ahead of him.

They were rounding the final stretch and Matt could see the numbers speeding down toward zero in his internal clock. Just a little bit more! He pushed himself further, faster, pulling even with the brown eyed teen. Yagami knew he was there, he ran faster. So did Matt. Faster and faster.

He didn't know why, but for the first time in his life, he was determined to keep up. He would not be left behind. Not this time.

They crossed the finish line at top speed. Together. They shared a glance out of the corners of their eyes that said everything and nothing all at once.

"TIME!" the gym teacher bellowed, eyes fixed incredulously on the back of Matt's head.

Matt paid the gaping teacher no mind as he and Yagami kept running. They slowed down in unison, until they were walking leisurely around the track, cooling down, though neither of them was particularly tired.

The other students were not so lucky, Matt noted peripherally. Most of them, even the more sporty students and especially the girls that

had been forced to all out run to finish off the last lap looked really tired. It was strange to see so many people tired after such a short run, but then again this school probably made kids run to fight obesity and promote healthy living whereas Wammy's taught kids how to run (and kill) for their lives. There was apparently a bigger difference between the two mindsets than he had originally suspected.

Whatever.

The teacher called them in and had everyone stretch again, all the while shooting Matt suspicious looks. Matt wondered if the guy was going to accuse him of cheating. Now *that* would be funny.

He stretched side by side with Yagami. The older boy kept glancing at him. Matt wondered why exactly he was looking at him (what was there to look at?) so intently, but quickly decided that he would be better off if he didn't know. He didn't have time for things like that - no matter how interesting the guy was.

He knew, he could *feel* that Yagami wanted to talk to him. He could see it written in the guy's chocolate brown eyes.

Well tough on him. Matt had no intention of talking. To him or to anyone.

The class ended and Matt hightailed it out of there, easily loosing Yagami in crowd thanks to his own height (or lack thereof) all the while dreading the rest of this horrible, endless day in this hell called high school.

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Okay. So let me explain a few things. First of all, I do not hate Mello, so don't think I do. It's just a part of the story and if it upsets you then I'm sorry, but that's just how it is in this fic. Secondly, Matt doesn't have super powers. Gifted children tend to be very sensitive (i.e. really good senses of smell, sensitive eyes and heightened hearing, etc.). My sister says that the really little kids at the Gifted School she

teaches at walk around with their hands over their ears because it gets so loud for their poor sensitive ears that they can't think. From there is wasn't such a stretch to assume that a Wammy kid would be that sensitive, or that he wouldn't shy away from taking advantage of his skill.

Now that that's over... how was it? I initially wanted to end it somewhere else, but I finally decided that most people would rather a quicker update than the perfect chapter I was envisioning.

As always, though, I'm worried about well I'm keeping Matt in character. Am I doing a good job with that? Also, this chapter wasn't as funny (or as funny as my stuff ever gets) as some of the others. But still, I'd like to ask all my readers a really important favor. As a writer, I like to judge myself (at least in part) on two criteria. The first is that I can make my reader laugh. The second is that I can make them cry.

I don't foresee there being a lot to cry about in this story (though you never know), but it would be a huge favor to me if you could let me know the things in my story that make you laugh out loud (or cry, I suppose). It's really important to me that I know what I'm doing right so that I can do it better the next time!

Anyway, sorry for the super long author's note. I hope you liked the chapter. And while I always appreciate story alerts and story favorings, they don't really tell me anything. Comments, question, suggestions, critiques... I love to hear from you guys! It's really important to me!

Until next time

## Chapter 6

Hi guys, sorry it took so long for this to come out, but real life rears its pesky head now and again. Don't worry, though, I still don't intend to abandon this story.

I'd really like to thank all of my reviewers from the last chapter: "A hooked reader", **Merichuel**, **AuraBlackWolf**, **Shinra'sCrazyTurk**, **xthirteenx**, "anon ()", and **Sjezza** . I love you all!!!

And for my anonymous reviewers:

"A hooked reader": Thank you so much for your review, I'm glad you enjoyed the last chapter and especially Convict-sensei.

"anon ()": Thank you so much for reviewing. Matt's mind is an interesting place, isn't it? It makes up for the fact that he tends to say less than fifteen words per chapter. Convict-sensei returns in this chapter and the next. I'm glad you like him.

**Sjezza** : For some reason your review isn't showing up or allowing me to respond... so I'll just respond to you here. Thank you so much for your review! Yes the last chapter was a little bit sadder than the rest. The situation with Mello is a tricky one, it's part of the reason L is going to such extreme measures... And as for Matt's interest in Light... well, you'll have to see. In any case, I'm glad gym was a hit. I hope you enjoy this new chapter!

08/30/09 Edit Note: Just fixing a minor problem that was bugging me.

Please enjoy...

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Chapter 5

Matt managed to avoid the brunette for most of the rest of the day. He hid in the bathroom after gym and only returned to class at the last possible moment. He hadn't even gotten in trouble for being late (the teacher had assumed he had gotten lost without him even having to say a word - one of the upsides to being the new kid was that people assumed you were directionally retarded or in other words 'special').

He ghosted down the aisles of desks as quickly as he could without being too obvious about the fact that Yagami was making him uncomfortable with his burning stares. Damn. Weren't these people supposed to be polite? Oh, but then again Yagami was nothing like any of these people; he just pretended to be a proper, flawless, model student. It was all a lie, just a pretty mask hiding very interesting things... that Matt was in no way shape or form interested in investigating. Nope. Not at all.

Luckily, Yagami sat closer to the front of the room and couldn't stare at him during class without being obscenely obvious. The guy was way too refined to do something like that, so Matt was safe for a short while.

He quickly bored, though, of being safe. (What exactly he was saving himself from he really had no idea.) He sat and ignored lectures on things he already knew (or could figure out on his own without being lead through it like a toddler) and slowly lost his mind. Matt could feel his brain melting and beginning to drip out of his ears. Enduring this day after day really could drive a man to suicide... or perhaps homicide if for no other reason than to escape the never ending, mind numbing boredom.

Hmm... what would L think of him contemplating murder? Would he be disappointed? Maybe he would get a clue and realize that Matt was in no way fit to be his heir and send him home. No. If it came to that, home would be the last place he went. L would send him to prison or to his death... but then again, L cared little for justice when it didn't suit him to. If L really wanted Matt to be his successor, a little



thing like murder wouldn't stop him from doing everything he could to get his way.

What a bastard.

Much to Matt's pleasure, his hateful musings ate up a great deal of time and soon it was time for lunch. Unfortunately, he quickly realized that this was not a good thing. For one, he didn't have a lunch (again). For another, the free movement allowed during lunch time left him wide open to Yagami. (Matt was unsure of why it was so important to stay away from the guy - he was so *interesting* ! - but he could not escape the gut wrenching feeling that everything - *everything* - would change if he didn't. He did not want change. He hated change. Look where change got him: trapped in a foreign country at the mercy of a psychotic detective. And NO he was not harping on that!)

The bell rang and Matt knew he had to get out of there. If he waited too long, Yagami would corner him and then there was no way he could escape without making some sort of scene that would draw all sorts of unnecessary and unwanted attention. So when the bell rang, he was up and out of his seat, walking as quickly as he possibly could without breaking into a run. Once he escaped the confines of the classroom he took up a light job (ugh, the things he did for the sake of privacy), trying to put a lot of distance between Yagami and him.

Eventually Matt calculated that he had probably made it far enough that Yagami had either given up or been sidetracked by his adoring fans. Deciding that he was safe for the moment, he gratefully slowed to a walk.

Matt glanced around the hallway he was in. He didn't recognize the area, but after quickly referencing his mental map of the school (promptly memorized on the first day so that were he ever to get chased by an angry mob of testosterone pumping males (i.e. - bullies) he wouldn't get cornered), he realized that he was near the school library.

Library = Computers = Sanctuary

Library it was.

He found the place easily enough. He was disappointed, though he really shouldn't have been. It was ridiculous to even hope that the school library might be even a hundredth of what Wammy's House's Library was. Wammy's House had two libraries: the original library (old, traditional, filled with books) and the new library (a converted ballroom [what use did a bunch of orphans have for a ballroom?] filled with book cases stretching to the top of the high vaulted ceiling, large over stuffed leather chairs and computers [gloriously state of the art masterpieces]). It was utterly unrealistic of him to expect anything similar here. This place was a normal, everyday school (even if it was private and one of the best in Japan), of course it wouldn't have a library fit for geniuses, since they obviously didn't have any of those (... except for Yagami... maybe... but Matt didn't know for sure just how smart the guy really was, and appearances aside, it wasn't like the guy could really be Wammy level... he was no L).

This library, though... was pathetic. They had books, of course. But the selection was so... limited. And books only came in Japanese and English. There were a few in Chinese and Korean, but that was *it* . Really! And the computers! Don't get him started on those six year old pieces of junk. There were so few of them, too!

The whole picture of it nearly made him whimper in despair. It was all just another reminder of just how un-Wammy this place was. The redhead let himself wallow happily in his misery for a moment. He needed to remember that he hated being here. He would put on the façade of apathy for L, but never, not once could he let himself forget that he neither belonged nor wanted to belong here and that the moment the opportunity presented itself, he would get his ass back to England and Mello, where it belonged.

Good dog. Always finding your way back to your Master. Have a cookie.

Matt shook off the self-mocking thoughts and bit back on his sadness. Class would be starting soon, so he wouldn't have enough time to play with the computers (slow as they were it would take too long to hack into the school's files - Yagami would have to remain an unknown for a just a little bit longer, just till he could get ho- no, not home, never home - the apartment, the *apartment* . When he got back to that place he would show that Yagami wasn't the only one who knew how to hack a computer). He was more than mildly upset about going without computer access (entire days without touching his fingers to a keyboard! What was the world coming to?), but he had finished writing out his program... what else was there to do?

Maybe... a book?

He had nothing against books. He actually rather liked reading (in the days before he had any idea what a gameboy was, all he had done was read anything and everything he could get his tiny, little kid hands on), he just preferred the action packed visuals of games and the way *he* could control the action - immersing himself in another world (a better world, where the good guys always won, no one was left behind, and orphans always found the loving families they had always dreamed of). But with the in-school ban on games (goddamned Ignoramus)... maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to check out some books.

Anything to pass the time...

And keep his mind off that Yagami.

Shit.

Matt banged roughly on his head with his fist. What was with that guy? Why couldn't Matt stop thinking about him? Yeah, alright, he was... magnetic and athletic and a good hacker (apparently)... so what? What did it matter? It didn't. And that was the problem.

Fuck.

Whatever.

To distract himself, Matt moved quickly, darting through the rows of books pulling off a few that interested him. He picked all English titles, simply to cut down on the number of people who would bother him about it. He walked over to the desk and set down his selections, all six of them. On the top of the stack was a thin volume of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, under that were the only two books the library had by Heinlein, followed by *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. These might keep him through till the end of next week, especially if he was only reading at school. Besides, reading six inflammatory books, one after the other was sure to raise some eyebrows and maybe cause a scene or two, enough for a few shits and giggles at the very least. And as only Mello's nonexistent God could know Matt needed as much of that as he could get.

Matt kept his face as blank as possible as he watched the half asleep librarian check out his books, watching with well hidden amusement as the books she was processing finally penetrated her boredom dulled mind. He watched as she did an amusing double take, her eyes growing comically wide as she took in the six provocative titles.

"Is this some kind of joke young man?" the woman demanded, her face tight with anger.

"Joke?" the redhead innocently cocked his head to the side, sacrificing his daily word limit for the sake of amusement.

"Well, you can't have all of these. There's a two book limit."

Matt froze. "What do you mean, limit?" he asked, uncomprehending. If anything Wammy's House had a five book minimum policy at its libraries. How could they honestly *limit* his reading materials? That was - that was...

"Exactly what it sounds like," the woman droned.

The situation was no longer amusing. The boy decided that he officially hated this woman. How dare she try to take his last refuge from boredom away from him? He should chuck Ulysses at her head. It was a big book; if the impact didn't kill her it might give her a grade three concussion. It would serve the bitch right. And L would have to pay her hospital bills... "But- "

"But what?"

"But I *need* them!" Matt cried, his carefully crafted indifference close to shattering into a thousand pieces on the floor of the Library.

"You *need* six long classics?" the horrible devil woman asked incredulously.

Matt took a deep breath; his normally apathetic demeanor fell away, replaced by the roaring anger than had been lurking patiently behind his carefully constructed mask. All the anger, confusion, and desperation burst out in an uncontrollable torrent of sound. "How can you deny me? I'm just a poor innocent victim who's been dragged halfway across this god forsaken planet at the whims of a madman who had delusions of grandeur and thinks he can manipulate me to his own disturbed ends, when all I want is to go home and be with Mells and never have to sit on a thirteen hour plane ride from hell while I puke my poor abused stomach out; it would serve the bastard right if I started smoking, you know, to deal with all the stress he's been putting me through, and then I'd *die* and it'd be his god damned fucking fault for driving me to it! And now you're going to deny me books. *Books* ? All I want, all I asked for were for a few simple books, to pass the time and ease the mind numbing boredom of dealing with mindless zombies and misinformed teachers and suddenly that's too much to ask?" He finished, winding down his angry rant with an angry hiss, a little out of breath; his face tinted a faint shade of red from the exertion of his rant.

"I- I, well, no, I mean..." the woman stammered, looking completely out of her depth.

" *Well ?*" Matt demanded. She was close to breaking. He could feel it. And that made losing his cool a little bit less embarrassing. He could pretend he had blown up like that on purpose, just to get his way. Ah, Mello could lie like no other, but when it came down to it, not even Mello could beat Matt in that little category called self-deceit. There, Matt was the Master.

"I... oh, fine. Just once, though. And you have to bring them all back in on time, understand?" the woman said harshly, desperately trying to make up for the fact that she was giving in to an undersized student wearing goggles of all things. She had held out pretty long, though. It was actually sort of impressive. He had scored third in his 'Methods of Interrogation and Manipulation' class, after all.

Matt watched closely as she finished checking out his books, lest she try to take any of them.

Paranoid? Who him? Ha!

Now he had just enough time to get back to class. He walked quickly through the halls, his six books held tightly to his chest, as he carefully, piece by piece, put his mask back together. He hoped no one noticed the cracks in his normally blank visage...

Who was he kidding? There was only one person in that room that could possibly notice, and even if he did, why would Yagami give a damn? A guy like that had a lot more important things to do than bother with someone as worthless as Matt.

---

Matt managed to sneak back into the room just before of the teacher. As he walked to his desk he could feel the fleeting gazes of his curious classmates as well as a single forceful glare. Matt didn't have to look to know who was glaring at him. Yagami knew that Matt had avoided him. He also knew where Matt had been hiding now, the books he was clutching in his hands made that obvious. Consequently, the library was no longer a sanctuary; in fact it was

probably the first place Mr. Big Brown Eyes would start looking.  
Grah!

Well, whatever, it was probably for the best. If he spent too much time in the library L might get the wrong idea and think he was winning or something. Because he wasn't. Not by a long shot. Matt would bludgeon himself to death with a giant key (or, you know, Ulysses ) before he'd ever let that bastard win.

Class started. Matt paid attention long enough to turn in his L-bashing paper, but then he opened one of his books ( Stranger in a Strange Land - How fitting for his situation!) and began to read, keeping only about a fifth of his attention on the teachers' lectures.

He sat through several very peaceful classes this way, but all of that shattered like so much broken glass in the face of math class.

Shirami-sensei marched into class clutching a stack of papers and wearing a very strange expression on his face. The teacher walked to his desk and sat down in his chair. He fiddled, noisily with his stack of papers before laying them flat on the desk.

Matt didn't bother glancing up from his book. He knew what his score would be.

He felt the heavy weight of his teacher's gaze on him and reconsidered his lack of worry. *He* knew what his score would be... but that didn't mean the teacher would. The man probably thought he had cheated, even though Matt was only in his class because he was supposed to be smart. This could... prove troublesome. Shit. Why couldn't people just leave him alone?

"Settle down, class," Shirami-sensei said. "I have the result of your quizzes. As usual, they were generally miserable, but on average fairly decent, thanks to the efforts of a few." He got to his feet and went about the room returning papers. Groans and exclamations of delight followed in his wake.

Matt however, did not get his paper back. Upon looking up, he realized that neither had Yagami.

What was going on? First scores are given out *individually* (he had been at Wammy's for so long that the idea of one's standing in the school being private was an entirely foreign concept) and then he doesn't get his back?

L was probably behind this. He definitely wasn't being paranoid in thinking that, either. That man, if indeed he really was a man and not a woman or a robot of some sort in disguise, seemed to take unholy pleasure in making Matt's life difficult. It was entirely probable that one of the world's most famous and busiest figures was taking time out of his over booked schedule to monitor one boy's life and mess it up wherever possible.

Or maybe Matt just had really shitty luck. Yeah, that could definitely be it.

It could be a fun combination of both, a nasty voice in the back of his mind suggested merrily. Matt valiantly resisted the urge to beat himself to death with his library books. After all, the librarian would never let him check out a book ever again if he returned her precious books covered in blood. But he'd be dead so...

"Your attention," Shirami-sensei said from the front of the room, clutching a few remaining papers in his hands. "Kitamaru-kun forgot to put his name on his paper. This is an automatic zero," the teacher said stiffly, pulling one of the papers out of the pile and setting it face down on his desk. One of the boys somewhere to Matt's right swore loudly and leapt to his feet. "Sit down Kitamaru-kun," Shirami-sensei droned, "Talk to me after class." Matt didn't bother to look and see if the student complied or not, but since the teen didn't say anything else, Matt figured that he had.

"Now," the teacher said, the odd light returning to his eyes. "Today I present to you two perfect scores."



The class broke out into whispers at this news. Matt frowned slightly. Was it really so rare to get a perfect score? Listening to the awed whispers, he realized that it apparently was.

"Another perfect score?"

"No way!"

"Who could match Yagami-kun?"

"Damn, he's too smart!"

"Yagami-kun is so cool!"

"Heh, that guy brings up the school average all on his own."

"But who else could have gotten it?"

"That's enough!" Shirami-sensei cut in sharply. "The first goes of course to Yagami-kun," he announced, holding out a test paper. Matt watched as the brunette gracefully got to his feet and *flowed* across the room to accept his paper, apparently oblivious (or rather all too aware) of the heavy weight of the half admiring, half jealous stares of his fellow classmates.

The red head frowned. What was with this big production? Why were the perfect scores the only ones singled out? Had it always been like that? At Wammy's everyone stood alone, but here... Yagami was the only one who was alone.

Matt's frown deepened. That explained a lot... at the same time, though, it didn't really tell him anything at all. This was just a single factor in a much larger equation... One he had absolutely no interest in solving at all. Right?

Right.

Matt watched as Yagami bowed respectfully to his teacher, turned neatly on his heel and faced the class. Their eyes met across the

room. Yagami's gaze slid down and over Matt, ending on a desk that was empty but for the book he was reading. His gaze snapped back up, boring right through tinted lenses and deep into wide green eyes.

He knows.

Matt suppressed a shiver as he stared into those blazing brown eyes.

He was fighting a two front war, he realized suddenly. If history had taught him anything, it was that fighting two wars at once was a mistake one rarely recovered from. But here he was, attempting to pacify L and keep everyone, especially this stranger at several arm lengths (a few football field lengths would also be appreciated). The catch 22 was that any move that put him ahead in one battle seemed to doom him in the other. In pacifying L and acing this test, he might as well have attached a neon sign to head proclaiming "I am Different - Notice Me!!!!!"

He was so screwed.

Yagami refused to break eye contact as he walked serenely back to his own desk (the other idiots in the class probably didn't even realize the subtle battle of wills that was going on right under their noses) until he had to look away in order to resume his seat.

Matt tore his eyes away from the brunette just in time to catch Shirami-sensei's suspicious gaze. "The second perfect score," the man said, "goes to our new student: Greene-kun. Excellent job, Greene-kun. I'm sorry to have doubted you; you were put with this class for a reason, after all." The way the man spoke left little doubt in Matt's mind that his teacher probably thought he had cheated. The lack of confrontation, though, meant that either the guy was a lot smarter than he seemed (highly unlikely) or that someone else had headed this issue off at the pass. In other words... L. Damn that stupid detective. What the hell did that mean, "put with this class for a reason"?

Matt slowly got to his feet and walked to the front of the room. He kept his face blank even as he peripherally registered the heavy stares and hissing whispers of his classmates. He wished they all could mind their own business and stop *staring* at him. His fingers twitched imperceptibly and he wished for one of his games to play, to hide behind. No one pays attention to the game freak, after all. The red head took the paper from the teacher and glanced briefly at the perfect score that had gotten everyone so excited. He didn't get it. The test had been easy, hadn't it? Back home, with a test like that, every student in the class would have gotten a perfect score.

Then again... he wasn't home, was he?

And these people... they were... normal.

But then, what did Matt care how they were or what they thought? The only battle that mattered was his fight against L. And if he had to make himself the subject of hatred, jealousy, awe, incredulity and whatever else these people might throw at him in order to win, then so be it.

He turned to face the class. As he walked back to his seat he found that he could easily ignore the looks and the murmurs... but for the life of him, he could not ignore those searching bronze eyes that were suddenly a lot less hollow, that spark of triumphant curiosity shining brighter than ever in the ever deeper depths of brown.

And despite himself... he wanted to know what lay behind those eyes.

Fuck.

He resisted the urge to pull his hair out in frustration, because though it might make him feel better, it would probably not help his situation at all.

He sighed as he sunk into his chair, feeling the strain on his apathetic mask more acutely than ever.

Would this day ever end?

---

Needless to say, the day did eventually end. And somehow he did manage to survive it.

Matt sat on the bleachers reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He had finished *Stranger in a Strange Land* before class had ended the day before. The rest of the school day had been spent studiously shutting out everything except the plot of his book. At the end of the day, he was the first one out the door. He had no interest in staying around and making himself either a target for intrigued students or the subject to that Yagami guy's scrutiny.

Yagami... Yagami Moon, he had discovered after he had finished the pile of work left for him by someone (probably the Ignoramus). There had been even more work for him than the day before, (not much, of course, but there was definitely a one percent increase in the amount left for him) and so went nine perfectly good hours of his life that he would never get back. He was exhausted by the time he finished the pile of work laid out for him, but curiosity still got the better of him.

Who was Yagami?

His first name was apparently "Moon", Matt found after a little bit of digging. With a name like that, Matt was surprised the guy was as popular as he was... but then again, with a guy like that, his name could have been Mudd, and people would still swoon at his perfectly fake smile. Maybe the name was the reason for the façade... No, it wouldn't be that simple. Yagami was too complex for that. That guy had layers upon layers hiding him away from the world. What, Matt couldn't help but wonder, was he hiding?

Yagami Moon, was a sixteen year old second year student at Daikoku Private Academy. He had an unremarkable younger sister who was just starting middle school. His mother was similarly unremarkable. She was neither very intelligent nor very ambitious

and the only things that made her at all interesting were her genius son (perfect scores across the board since he was old enough to be given tests) and her husband, who just happened to be the chief of police of the NPA.

That Matt had been placed into a class where he was at close quarters with a genius who really was worthy of Wammy's (should he ever become an orphan) and who had close connections to the police force was really too... convenient for it to be a mere coincidence. This was a part of L's plan, he realized.

Now if only he could figure out how...

Around him, the other students shuffled over to bleachers. Moon was nowhere in sight. Matt flipped a page in his book.

He had fallen asleep not long after examining Yagami's basic file. There was more to find, he was sure, but the long day finally caught up with him, and he'd had no choice but to surrender to exhaustion.

He flipped another page and considered who would make a better Dorian Gray, Mello or Moon? Both had the looks for it... but would either of them be capable of Dorian's level of self-deceit and depravity? To live forever without aging a day... it really was enough to destroy a person, but at the same time if the person in question had either boy's intelligence...

Matt frowned imperceptibly. Perhaps it was better not to consider such things, regardless of how impossible or hypothetical the situation was. He wasn't superstitious, not in the least, but even Matt knew when he was courting danger, and sometimes he even cared enough to avoid it.

"All right class," Convict-sensei blustered from the patch of grass in front of the bleachers. "Pay attention! Today we're starting our tennis unit. In order to ease you lot into this complicated and intense game, Yagami-kun has agreed to stage an exhibition match for your benefit. This is an important learning experience for all of you and I expect

you to be on your best behavior, or you will all run laps around the field until you pass out. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," the students parroted, eyeing each other with nervous eyes that asked if this guy was serious or not.

For his part, Matt had no doubt that Convict-sensei was being serious. That guy was so serious he was going to give himself an ulcer. It couldn't happen to a nicer person though, so Matt wasn't too concerned.

"Yagami," the burly man called, "Get up here."

Gracefully, the brunette rose from where he had been seated on the bleachers (uncomfortably near Matt, the guy had been staring intently at the red head for the better part of the last fifteen minutes). The teen neither hurried nor dawdled, but managed to glide over to the teacher.

Yagami was wearing the standard P.E. outfit that Matt had the pleasure of not having to wear. Somehow, the guy managed to make the monstrosity look like it was tailored just for him. The racket that he held easily in his hand, like it was an extension of his body, only completed the "God of Athletics" image that the teen was exuding with every not so inconsequential movement of his body. The other students (particularly the females, though Matt noticed a good number of the males being similarly enchanted) were understandably impressed. The whispers roared like wild fire.

Matt predicted that Yagami would see at least a ten percent increase in love confessions and undying devotion after the spectacle he was going to make of himself. He wondered if Moon liked all the attention. It was possible... but at the same time, Matt was almost certain that the guy just found the love he inspired an irksome bother that he put up with because it could be useful at times...

What a sociopath.

Matt smirked internally, because really, who was *he* to talk?

"Now, since Yagami has been kind enough to showcase his expertise for us, and considering his skill, I have allowed Yagami-kun to pick the opponent that he believes will be the most challenging. We wouldn't want to watch a one-sided slaughter match, now would we?"

The redhead seriously doubted that the man would have minded watching said slaughter match. Yagami had definitely asked to choose his own opponent. Interesting. What was he...

"Have you made your choice, Yagami-kun?" The gym teacher asked.

But what did it matter? Matt would have a period to sit around, watch Yagami trounce some poor sod, all with a smile on his face. No skin off Matt's back, and he might even learn a thing or two about the mystery that was Yagami Moon. Simple, harmless, what could possibly go wrong?

"Yes, Otoharada-sensei," Moon said glibly, "I have."

Bronze met green through tinted lenses and Matt's half hearted positive outlook fell flat on its face.

Oh. That. *That* could go wrong.

"I choose Greene Matto-kun as my opponent."

Shit.

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Well... what do you think?

Matt in a library... with books. That's not something you get to read about very often...

And tennis? What was I thinking? Ironically I just got into Prince of Tennis (though I had actually decided on a tennis match before I

even thought of looking into that anime). PoT is the most ridiculous, long drawn out show I've seen since DBZ, however the characters are amazing. I am a sucker for complex, multidimensional characters.

For those of you who didn't get it, Matt thinks Light's name is Moon because of the kanji used to spell his name. Matt'll figure it out pretty quickly once he actually, you know, talks to Light.

What do you think of Light's choice in tennis partners? Who will win? How many colors can Convict-sensei's face turn?

And of course, how was Matt? Still in character, right?

In any case, I hope you liked the chapter.

And I love to hear from you guys: comments, questions, suggestions, critiques... It's really important to me to know what you guys think!

Until next time



## Chapter 7

So yeah, long time no update, right? I'm sorry about that. If you like, I could tell you my sob story about having my brand new computer crash (taking several pages of this chapter with it) during my first week of school etc, etc, but I figured I'd spare everyone the rant and just get this out as soon as I could.

I'd really like to thank all my lovely, patient reviewers who constantly inspire me to work on this fic: **Sejezza**, **Merichuel**, **SunnydayinPallet**, **Shinra'sCrazyTurk**, **The Talented Mr Kipling**, **DrunkKid-Catholics** (who reviewed twice!), **mehhdroopyL**, **AuraBlackWolf**, "Grey", **phantom-willow217**, **K-Danuve**, **Dance Away**, **kfjkaskm**, and "your reader". You're incredible and I love you all!

And for my anonymous reviewers:

"Grey": Thank you so much for the review! I promise to keep working even on this story. It has an ending and I intend to reach it, don't worry. (If I ever take a year to update, please spam me with PMs telling me to get my ass in gear)

"your reader": Thank you so much for your review. I'm glad you like the story. As for the tennis match... well, keep reading.

And so I give you: The Chapter in Which There is Tennis!

Please enjoy...

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## Chapter 6

Matt hated physical activity. He avoided it whenever possible. (It was only through Wammy's unbending insistence that he possessed any sort of physical prowess whatsoever.) Personal preferences aside, he just didn't see the point. Why on earth would he bother chasing a

stupid black and white ball around a field when he could be chasing down zombies with a chainsaw on his x-box? Where was the appeal in sweating buckets and accumulating (more) bruises under a burning sun when he could be reprogramming Wammy's security system to obey his every whim? And even more incomprehensible, why would he ever waste his time bouncing various sized balls on hard packed concrete when he could be flying through cyberspace, bouncing around amongst the satellites of various world powers? Psssh, no contest.

Needless to say, Matt and sports did not mix. Period.

Consequently, Matt had never stepped foot on a tennis court in his life.

The Picture of Dorian Gray lay limply in his lap, utterly forgotten in the face of Yagami Moon's confident challenge.

There was no way he could do it. He didn't know the first thing about tennis. He had never so much as held a racket in his puny little hand or bounced a tennis ball. He'd have to decline. It was for the best, wasn't it?

The only exposure Matt had ever had to the sport had been during those two weeks last summer when Linda and her posse of girls had staged a coup over control of all the TVs in the house (and piled every last one of them into main play room) in order to watch the Wimbledon tennis tournament. Normally, Matt would have avoided the fangirling mass of preteen hormones and holed up in his room until the marathon of panting/moaning/sweating tennis professionals was finally over. At the time, though, Mello had been going through some sort of stage where he had morphed into some kind of diehard tennis enthusiast. Matt supposed (though he didn't really care either way) that the sudden interest in smacking small yellow-green balls with oddly shaped rackets had blossomed from the passing rumor that L had been a junior tennis champion a few years back. It was a stupid rumor, but when you dump a bunch of genius children into an enclosed environment with the goal of *becoming* another genius, you

got obsession, and consequently stupid, baseless rumors. Rumors like "L-was-a-tennis-champ-gosh-isn't-he-incredible?!" were incredibly common (for several weeks three years ago, the kids had been convinced that L was a sugar addict and had a bizarre fondness for capoeira), though, so Matt rarely bothered to keep track of them.

In any case, for whatever reason, Mello had decided that *they* needed to watch Wimbledon. When Matt expressed his disinterest in this plan, Mello threw his (Matt's) gameboy at the wall (bless its nonexistent sole, the poor thing shattered on impact, so at least it didn't suffer). His resistance was ultimately meaningless since the end result still found Matt being dragged along anyway, regardless of his personal feelings on the matter, forced to endure hour upon hour of tennis torture.

He had been prepared to hate it, to go slowly insane and eat his own hair, but somewhere along the way he started to understand. Bit by bit he began to see the skill involved in what had at first appeared to be merely grunting and senseless ball-whacking. He noticed the split second decisions that won and lost games. He saw the subtle strategies lurking beneath the surface of the games and quickly caught onto why some plans worked and some failed miserably. He even learned to differentiate a smash from a volley and a lob from a drop shot. And by the end he was cheering along with the others (in his own, extremely internalized way) when Goran Ivanišević won his first Grand Slam and Venus Williams secured her third career Grand Slam title.

In the immediate aftermath of the two week tennis marathon, Matt had considered, briefly, following tennis, maybe even looking into playing it himself. Before he could decide whether or not it would be worth the effort, Mello's little obsession petered out. Near had beaten him even more severely than usual on the following battery of tests and Mello blamed Wimbledon. He consequently swore off tennis as the sport of the devil and forbid the mention of it in his presence on pain of death. Not interested in fighting about it, regardless of his

own passing interest, Matt had done what he always did, bowed to his best friend's wishes and quietly let it go.

For the first time, Matt found himself regretting that decision. But regret was meaningless. Regret did nothing to change the fact that Matt was an utter n00b when it came to any sport, let alone tennis and that accepting Yagami Moon's challenge, regardless of how interesting it might prove to be, would be suicide. And while Matt was many things, suicidal was not one of them.

Generally.

Sometimes.

Well, on a good day.

He was a Wammy kid, after all, he had to be smart enough to have some sense of self preservation... right?

All rambling tangents aside, the simple fact of the matter was that Matt had no business on a tennis court, especially not when it involved playing an exhibition match with a junior championship winner (or so the guy's records reported, at least). The scenario was analogous to Matt being the poor unarmed prisoner who had the shitty luck to be the one chosen to be dumped in the middle of the coliseum at the nonexistent mercy of the bloodthirsty lion and the roaring crowds.

Three guesses as to the identity of the bloodthirsty lion in this analogy.

The first two don't count.

"Well! What are you waiting for, Greene-kun?" roared Convict-sensei, his face a stunning shade of fuchsia. One of the few areas of the Matt's mind not devoted to dealing with this mess of a challenge carefully noted the color so that he could properly appreciate the

hilarity of the situation once he was safely back in his apartment and free from this hellhole.

"I don't have a racket," Matt said blandly, not moving from his seat. That could work. No racket = forfeit. A win-win situation.

"Why you!" the gym teacher growled lowly.

"That's fine," Yagami interjected smoothly, his dangerous brown eyes still fixed on Matt. "You can borrow one," he said with a polite smile that hid everything and nothing all at once as he gestured pointedly at the barrel of rackets by the edge of the courts.

Ah. Fuck. Well, it was worth a shot.

Matt suppressed a snort at that though. Worth a shot? Maybe all this time spent among the rampant stupidity of the general public was getting to him; if he was starting to do something as pointless as feel hopeful about a situation. Still, even if he didn't have an easy out, the answer was still no, because to do anything else would be absurd. Utterly ridiculous, even. Now all he had to do was open his mouth and tell Mr. Look-At-Me-I'm-Perfect-Even-Though-It's-All-Lie exactly where he could shove his racket.

Yes, yes, that's exactly what he should be doing... so why wasn't he?

Why was he setting his book down and getting up and *walking over to them* ?!

Why was he examining the barrel of rackets like he had any idea what he was looking at?

What the *fuck* was he thinking?

He wasn't, obviously.

And that was how he found himself standing just in front of the white baseline of a neatly manicured court, a blue rimmed racket clutched

tightly in his hand, watching Yagami bounce a tiny yellow ball against the green concrete of the court. Yagami caught the ball deftly each time, even though it was clear (to Matt, at least) that he wasn't paying much, if any attention to the action. He was far too busy watching Matt.

Fuck.

Why was he doing this again?

Before he could properly recant his inexplicable decision to agree (had he really agreed? He didn't remember agreeing to anything...) to put himself in this ridiculous position, Yagami was already moving. He tossed the small yellow ball high into the air and in one glorious movement, swept his right arm through the air. His red rimmed racket connected with the falling projectile with a resounding *thwak*. The ball soared, a barely visible yellow blur through time and space, over the net, impacting with the court one and half feet from where Matt stood before proceeding to spring back into the air, and right into the chain link fence that encircled the court. The red head hadn't so much as moved a muscle.

Matt blinked.

"15 - Love," an excitable student (who was apparently playing the line judge thing - that was what Linda had called it, right?) called.

Yagami's fans roared in approval.

Matt blinked again.

"Oi! Greene-kun! That doesn't count! This isn't some walk in the park, you maggot! You have to move your lazy *behind* and go for the ball!" Convict-sensei roared above the cheers, his face an interesting shade of brick red.

Matt was oblivious to the tidal waves of sound barraging him on all sides. His unfocused green eyes stared blankly at the spot where

Yagami's ball had bounced. All he could see was the flash of yellow-green running through his mind again and again. He replayed the image over and over, from start to finish, from every possible angle. His mind tore apart those few precious seconds of time, breaking down Yagami's serve to the movements of his muscles and chemical interactions in his brain. He replayed the path of the ball, slowing the action down until he could visualize all the forces of nature acting on the ball.

After a few seconds, the red head's eyes refocused and the noise of the crowd swam back into focus. Matt's gaze zeroed in on Yagami. His analysis of the play was all conclusive. Yagami Moon was, if not a pro like Goran Ivanišević, well on his way to being one (if he hadn't quit, of course). Matt didn't need to be third to know that he well and truly stood absolutely no chance in hell of winning this game.

It was hard, though, to keep that knowledge firmly in mind while under that searing brown gaze. There was a challenge in those eyes, a challenge that Matt could not, regardless of what his self preservation instincts were telling him, ignore.

Matt realized with a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach that he didn't *want* to give up. He was always the one who caved, who gave in and let things go. It was always better that way, after all.

But now...

This one time...

For some reason...

He wanted to play.

Even though he had no idea what he was doing. He still wanted to play, wanted to make Yagami Moon run back and forth across the court, to make him work, to make him fight for his win. There was no doubt that he *would* win, but that didn't mean Matt had to lay down and let him have it.

"Do you hear me Greene-kun!" a distant part of his mind registered Convict-sensei's continued shouting, but Matt found that he could honestly care less. Convict-sensei, the Ignoramus, L, and everyone else could go screw themselves. He was going to play.

Matt let his lips quirk into a smirk (the first facial expression he had allowed himself in what felt like weeks, but was really only a few days). Yagami's eyes flashed and he returned the smirk with one of his own.

What an arrogant jackass.

The look was surprisingly familiar, but at the same time incredibly foreign. Never in his life had such a look been aimed at him, at Matt. It was always Near. Near, Near, Near. And Matt just tagging along for the ride like the useless baggage he was.

For the first time, this was something about him. Just him.

No one else.

Matt's smirk widened slightly.

What fun.

Matt spread his legs a little and bent his knees experimentally as he recalled to the forefront of his mind the games of Goran Ivanišević, Pat Rafter and dozens of other professional tennis players. The red head quickly ran through his memories of the various "ready stances" of the players, averaged them out and readjusted them for his own size, before finally dropping into what he calculated to be the best stance, racket at the ready.

Yagami's smirk widened minutely and then he was moving, sliding through that now familiar sequence of toss-swing-smack. The tiny yellow ball flew once again, but this time Matt was prepared. Copying the movements he had seen over and over again during



those endless summer days of Wimbledon tennis matches, he went for the ball.

He managed to graze the edge of the ball as it soared past.

"15 - Love!" The line guard called. The line guard called excitedly. The students roared. Convict-sensei shouted, his face tinged a healthy blue color.

The twelve-year-old's smirk did not waver in the face of the missed point, if anything; it grew as he carefully made adjustments to his stance and grip.

Yagami served again. Matt caught the ball in the center of his racket, but he underestimated the strength of Yagami's serve. While he managed to hold onto his racket, his return did not make it over the net.

"30 - Love!"

Right. He nodded minutely to himself in understanding. He needed more power. Easy enough.

Yagami served again.

This time he overestimated the serve, sending the ball flying with a resound *thwack*. The ball soared like a bird, sailing right into the fence without bouncing once.

"40 - Love!"

A small part of Matt noticed Convict-sensei blustering somewhere far away about how Yagami's next service ace would win the game, which would be the first of at least six games, depending on how poorly "Greene-kun" played. Matt couldn't have cared less. His entire world had shrunk to the size of that little yellow-green sphere and court that enclosed it. Anything beyond the court, beyond the moment, was lost to him. His insane maybe-an-escaped-sociopath

teacher, the Ignoramus, L, even Mello... they were all gone. It was just him and the ball and Yagami.

He realized with some surprise as he settled back into the "ready stance" that he would not have it any other way.

Yagami served again.

This time Matt knew just how hard to hit the ball. The red head watched with pride as the ball landed almost where he had intended and proceeded to bounce again, scoring him his very first point. The shot was poorly controlled and nothing like Yagami's graceful swings, but as far as Matt was concerned, the shot was gold. The fact that his score had only happened because he had caught Yagami off guard did nothing to dim his pride. This was a starting point; the first of what Matt knew would be many, many points and games.

He had time. He could only get better from here.

"40 - 15!"

Yagami's eyes sparked in renewed challenge as he served.

Matt did not disappoint. He returned the shot, his control even better than before. Yagami caught the ball with ease now that Matt no longer had the benefit of surprise on his side and sent the ball back with an elegant swing of his racket.

Matt, startled by the return even though he had expected it, had to scramble to return the ball. Somehow, he managed the shot (it even landed near where he had wanted it to go), but in the process he managed to set himself for a fall because the next thing he knew, the ball was flying back toward him. He couldn't get there in time; he could only watch as the ball soared by.

"Game. Yagami leads one game to Love!" cried the line guard. Funny, Matt had almost forgotten he was there, that any of the

spectators were there. "That's right, isn't it?"

"Correct. Acceptable work, Nakao-kun," Convict-sensei praised. Matt nearly died of shock at the display of humanity. Who knew the psycho had it in him? Matt sure didn't.

"Your serve," Yagami Moon said, drawing Matt's attention back to their game.

"Of course," the red head said, unable to stop his smirk from slipping into a tiny smile.

Moon's eyes shone with excitement. "Don't hold back," the teen said quietly in English.

Matt simply bounced the ball like Yagami had, all the while trying to figure out how the hell he was supposed to serve. After a moment, he decided to try Yagami's serve. It seemed like an easy enough move to start with and it would have the added benefit of giving the stupid enigma a taste of his own medicine.

He tossed the ball up and swept his racket through the air...

And he missed.

"Get your head out of the clouds Greene-kun!" roared Convict-sensei, his previous good mood long forgotten.

Matt ignored him. He adjusted his stance to further account for the rather large size difference between Yagami and him. Right. He had it now. He bounced the ball to steady himself, then tossed it high. He swept his racket through the air. This time the ball connected with a pleasant *thwak* and flew true. The damned thing even managed to land (approximately) where he'd intended in the service box.

Unfortunately, the slightly uncontrolled shot was effortlessly returned by his skilled opponent.

Matt was ready, though, for the return this time, and managed to counter it with surprising ease. The shot was still a little wild, but after each shot Matt made sure to carefully note his mistakes and painstakingly calculated dozens of tiny adjustments that were, bit by bit, shot by shot, allowing him to keep up with Yagami.

Eventually, Yagami managed to break the rally by pretending to hit the ball to the right before actually hitting it to the left.

"Love - 15!"

Matt's focus did not falter at the loss, but he silently vowed to keep a closer eye on Yagami's movements. He refused to be manipulated by a fake out like that again.

He used Yagami's serve again. The shot was much cleaner this time. Moon returned it, but Matt could tell that his opponent was starting to get annoyed at Matt's copy-cat routine. The guy hid it well, but the irritation burned as clear as day in those brown eyes of his. Were he not practically fighting for his life, Matt might have found the situation hilarious. Of course, the boy knew that Yagami really had no way of knowing about Matt's minimal experience with tennis. It wasn't *that* farfetched (he supposed) for Moon to suspect that Matt, for all his mediocre playing, was just fooling around, holding back in order to catch his opponent by surprise with an embarrassing defeat. Still, it was ridiculous: the guy thought he was being messed with! By Matt of all people! The twelve-year-old, despite the hopelessness of his situation, felt giddy with the realization that despite everything he was really getting to this guy. What an incredible feeling!

They rallied again. Matt was feeling increasingly confident in his shots and even tried experimenting with various styles he had seen the professionals use so readily. One such experiment ended with the ball flying out of bounds and another point lost. Matt couldn't've cared less.

He used Yagami's serve once more. Taking as he did so an idle moment to enjoy the older boy's well hidden consternation as he

struggled to figure out Matt's strategy. A part of him almost felt sorry for the guy, looking as he was for something that wasn't there, but the rest of him was too busy glorying in the excitement of the game to care. Let him stew, he thought as he countered Yagami's return, after all, a little uncertainty would probably be good for the bastard.

They rallied the ball back and forth across the court, once, twice, three times. On a whim, Matt took a chance, and pulled his return back, turning it into a gentle lob. The ball just made it over the net before dropping to the ground.

"15 - 30"

Yagami looked satisfied at the change up in his play. He probably thought the red head was ready to take him seriously. Matt almost felt sorry for what he was about to do. Almost.

He used Yagami's serve. It was perfect this time. And Yagami was perfectly infuriated to match. The teen return the serve violently, hitting the ball back across the court with all his strength.

Against his better judgment, Matt went for the ball. He managed to catch the ball in his racket, but the force was too much for him. The racket flew from his hands, falling to the court with an unpleasant clatter, the ball bounced once, twice, before rolled off to the side.

"15 - 40"

Matt felt a surge of irritation at Yagami's smug face. The ass thought he had made some sort of point. Matt growled softly to himself and grabbed up his racket with a bit more force than was strictly necessary, but he could honestly care less. If Mr. Moon was going to be like *that*, who was Matt to disagree? Time to switch things up a bit.

Matt served, but this time, he attempted a more complex serve that he had seen so often during the Wimbledon marathon. The shot was

a little wild and barely made it into the service box, but the change in style was so unexpected that Yagami missed the serve by a mile.

What was that called again? Oh yeah, an ace.

Bloody brilliant.

"30 - 40"

But rather than getting angry, like Matt half expected, rather than throwing a fit at the surprise move like the red head knew his best friend would have, Yagami *smiled* . And those cold, dead eyes were suddenly alive with an inexplicable warmth that Matt could see even from his side of the court. It was like Yagami Moon was coming alive before the Matt's very eyes.

"So you're finally ready to take me seriously?"

On the surface Moon's voice was as steady and elegant as ever, but that, as so much with this strange teen, was a lie. Though Moon's voice did not betray him, his body gave it all away. Even as he settled back into the ready position, Yagami was bursting with excitement... and joy.

Despite himself, Matt could not help but respond, quietly but firmly, "Only a fool would fail to take you seriously, Yagami-kun."

And with that, he served.

---

Please don't kill me for leaving it there! If I had waited to update until I was where I wanted to be in the story there wouldn't have been an update until the end of November!

Besides that, what do you think? Surprised? Who thinks Matt will be able to pull one over on Junior-Champ-Light?

How's the tennis? Easy to follow or confusing as hell?

And as always, how's Matt? Disregarding the necessary character development/growth, of course, is he still in character?

In any case, I hope you liked the chapter.

Please tell me what you think; constructive criticism is always appreciated and hearing from you guys always makes my day! (Besides, it's great incentive to get to work on the next chapter so we can get to the exciting conclusion of this match!)

Until next time

## Chapter 8

Hi guys! This had been a long time coming, I know, but real life could not be ignored. Don't worry, though, I still don't intend to abandon this story.

I'd really like to thank all my lovely, patient reviewers who constantly inspire me to work on this fic: **AuraBlackWolf**, **SunnydayinPallet**, **romantiscue**, **The Talented Mr Kipling**, **atomiclint**, **ShinigamiMailJeevas**, **Shinra'sCrazyTurk**, **Dance Away**, **random logic person**, **DrunkKid-Catholics**, **mehhdroopyL**, **K-Danuve**, "anon ()", and **UchidaKarasu** . You're all simply wonderful and I love every last one of you!

And for my anonymous reviewer:

anon (): The answer to your question "...er, why is Matt an American exchange student when he's English?" is quite simply that Wammy's House is run by paranoid people who bend to the whims of an even more paranoid genius detective. Basically, it's part of Matt's cover story. Since Matt lived in America before being orphaned and winding up at Wammy's, the cover story isn't entirely made of hot air and it helps to prevent curious individuals like one Yagami "Moon" from sticking their noses into things they shouldn't have their noses near. Does that answer your question? Anyway, thank you so much for your reviews! Matt's way too hard on himself, but that's just how he is. I'm glad you like the tennis match! As to who wins, you'll have to see! Oh, and by the way, three reviews in one day? You're so awesome it hurts! I hope to hear back from you again soon! Enjoy the chapter!

And so I give you: The Chapter in Which There is Still More Tennis!

(FYI: For those interested, this chapter was written to the song "Higher" by Creed played on a loop. I think it adds to the chapter if you listen to the song while you read, but that's just me)



Please enjoy...

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## Chapter 7

The serve went wild, landing nowhere near the service box.

He served again, reminding himself as he did to keep his head in the game. He could analyze Moon later.

This serve just barely made it into the service box, but Yagami was prepared for Matt's new move. Moon returned it easily. Matt countered. They rallied back and forth under the sun for what felt like ages. Then, quite suddenly, his opponent's form shifted, his wrist twisting strangely, and then the ball was flying back to Matt.

The red head attempted to go for the ball, but upon hitting the court the ball's once predictable flight pattern swerved off to the side. Matt gaped stupidly at the ball as it rolled away, his mind desperately trying to figure out what Yagami had done.

Nothing had changed, had it? Nothing but the guy's form... Oh.

Matt felt like an idiot. Even the knowledge that Yagami's form was the key to the move did not change the fact that he had to mentally go through the shot dozens of times before he had even the slightest clue of just how that shot worked. Damn. He had known from the beginning that Yagami was good, but this... how the hell was he supposed to counter *this* ?

A moment of panic swelled up in his chest, suffocating him with the rapid mantra he thought he'd escaped years ago: *stupid, useless, why bother, goddamned bastard, ungrateful, too stupid to speak, useless, keep your head down, nononono...*

"Game. Yagami leads two games to Love!" cried the line guard, startling Matt out of his reverie.

The redhead's eyes widened beneath his goggles as he snapped back to reality and forcefully pulled his mind back under control. His heart thudded loudly in his chest. A drop of sweat slid down his neck. Had he just... had he really? He hadn't had a relapse like that in years. And he'd just... over a *tennis match* ? Shit.

And still the feeling loomed at the edges of his mind. The need to run, to hide, to not let them see him. Never show your weakness, his mind screamed; never show your face. The pounding message behind his eyes: never, never, never try, because you can't succeed you worthless, stupid fuck.... And fuck.

He was better than this, damn it. Not by much, but... Fucking hell. He didn't want to deal with this shit. Not now, not ever.

But Yagami, curse him, fuck him. He was raising the bar. He was *asking* something of Matt. This wasn't a game. Not anymore. It was something else. Matt had no idea what it was, but that hardly mattered, did it? There Mister Moon went, raising the bar, changing the rules, and this whole thing was so out of control it wasn't funny, and the boy just wanted bright, golden Mello to burst onto the court, throw Matt over his shoulder and carry him away, back to a place where things made *sense* and no one expected anything of him (because there *wasn't* anything to expect, not from *Matt* ).

"My serve."

Matt stiffened, jerking out of his wildly tangential thoughts. The redhead managed a rigid nod to his opponent and settled back into a ready stance, preparing for Yagami's serve. He prayed to Mello's non-existent god-figure as he waited that none of what he was feeling had escaped his ironclad control and slipped onto his face. Nothing would be worse than letting Moon of all people see just how much this crap was affecting him. Matt would throw himself off a bridge before he let *that* happen.

Yagami's serve was as graceful as ever, and on the surface, the same serve he'd been using all along.

Matt quickly realized that even in tennis, appearances could be deceiving. The ball had a strange spin on it, and moments before Matt managed to get into position for the shot, the ball dropped suddenly, too fast for him to catch.

"15 - Love"

The hell? Was Moon *trying* to be cruel? Matt bit the inside of his mouth in frustration. Matt *knew* he was going to lose. But this was just brutal. This would teach Matt to ever think well of himself, wouldn't it? For a few minutes, he'd been hopeful... proud, even. He should know better than to think that he had the upper hand, some nonexistent being hated him too much to ever let something like that slide.

Why did he bother?

*So useless...*

Yagami served again.

Matt breathed in sharply, firmly suppressing his flight instinct while keeping his eyes riveted on Moon. It was the same strange serve with the same weird spin... but this time, this time Matt managed to catch the slight twist of the teen's wrist. And then he understood what Yagami was doing, in principle, at least.

It was enough.

He clumsily caught the serve with his racket. The ball didn't even make it over the net.

The red head found that he couldn't care less. The lurking panic that had been tearing away at the edges of his mind since Yagami first upped his ante suddenly quieted. It wasn't impossible, he realized. The move could be understood, broken, and returned. And Matt... Matt wasn't helpless. He could fight back. He may not win... actually, hell would probably freeze over and Near and Mello would have a

tea party together with the Queen of England before Matt would win against Yagami Moon at the guy's own sport. But that... didn't really matter. That wasn't the point of this.

Matt's eyes focused in on Yagami's face. He took in those intense brown eyes and the slight smile still lingering on the teen's face. As far as Matt could tell, Moon never acted like this. He was cool, calculating, perfect, and utterly fake. This, though... this wasn't a mask. This stupid game was actually making Moon happy.

Matt didn't understand it. But maybe... maybe if he finished this... he would.

The boy remembered his promise to himself. He had wanted to see Yagami run back at forth at his whim, he had wanted to see the teen *work* for his win; work for it like Mr. Moon had never worked for anything else in his oh-so-perfect life.

He still wanted that. Matt nodded to himself. Yes. He could do it.

"30 - Love"

Yagami served.

This time, Matt immediately saw the slight changes in his opponent's posture signaling that this would not be a normal serve. As the ball soared through the air, Matt's mind was spinning through calculations, trying to calculate the ball's path.

There. He had it. Matt adjusted his stance minutely and swung his racket just in time. The ball connected with his racket. His return went wild, only landing in bounds by the grace of pure chance. Yagami, not prepared for such an uncontrolled shot, missed it by a mile.

"30 - 15"

Moon nodded his head ever so slightly to Matt, gracefully acknowledging the point. Matt faltered for a moment; unsure of how to respond, before he remembered that his opponent had no idea how much he was struggling. Moon thought he was playing an equal, not an utter noob. And that... wasn't such a bad thing. Matt wondered how long he could keep it up.

The red head offered Yagami a tiny ghost of a smile and slid back into the ready-position.

Yagami served.

---

Matt loved cars. More specifically, he loved sports cars. He loved the sleek lines and beautiful craftsmanship of a well designed machine and could not wait until he gained enough height to pass for sixteen so that he could get one for himself. In the mean time, he played racing games by the dozen, even though they were pathetically easy and essentially pointless, because those games gave him a taste of the future.

After thoroughly demolishing the latest racing game he would lie on his bed and close his eyes, and for a moment he would be sitting in a custom sports cars (sometimes it was Ferrari and sometimes it was a Porsche and other times it was a car of his own design, made just for him and no one else in the whole world). And in that moment he would feel the thrum of the engine all around him as he and his baby tore down an endless stretch of road, shifting gears as he urged her faster and faster until they were going so fast that no one could stop them, no one could catch them. And for that moment, he would be... Free.

Matt swung his racket through the air, returning Yagami's counter with ease. He automatically dropped back, eyes fixed on Yagami, ready for anything.

The workout uniform he had gone to such lengths to permit himself was drenched with sweat and clung to his skin uncomfortably, but

Matt neither noticed nor cared. For the first time in his life, Matt didn't need a racing game to feel the power and freedom of the open road. For the first time, Matt was flying all by himself.

"40 - 30."

The court beneath his feet, the racket in his hands and his opponent across the net: these were all that existed, all the *mattered* to him. The rush of the game, the impossible excitement of a rally well played, of a move mastered in moments... he could feel it all thrumming through his veins like the purr of a car's engine.

"Game. Yagami leads three games to Love!"

Yagami, too, was soaked with sweat, a distant, disconnected part of Matt noted with dry amusement. But Moon was just as oblivious as Matt to the inconsequential discomforts of their pathetically mortal bodies.

"Love - 15."

Faster and faster, they were racing down the track...

"30- 15."

With each point Matt managed to scrounge, Yagami would push himself harder, coming back with something better, something that left their long forgotten audience gaping in awe. And with each of Yagami's clever little maneuvers, Matt would come up with one of his own. His mind was working faster than it ever had in his entire life, running countless calculations and simulations even as he sped after Moon, refusing to be left behind.

"Game. Yagami leads three games to one!"

Matt had never been so completely focused.

"15 - Love."

He had never felt so alive.

---

*Thwak*

Just a little faster.

*Thwak*

There. Right *there* .

*Pa-chink*

"Game. Yagami leads five games to three!"

Matt ducked his head, allowing his sweaty bangs to hang limply in front of his face, obscuring the infectious grin that had crept unbidden onto his face. He gulped down breaths of air like a drowning man, his heart pounding like it wanted to burst from his chest. Three games. He had won three games!

He chanced a glance up at Yagami and his grin morphed into a smirk. Moon was breathing hard, but his eyes still burning with that unquenchable fire that had swept Matt up into this battle of wits in the first place. Yagami was tired though, actually tired! Matt's smirk widened.

The redhead was no pro... but he had the hang of this game now. The little subtleties of the sport that had seemed so fascinating during the Wimbledon marathon were now the only thing he knew. Every bounce of the ball, every move that Yagami made... he saw it all, deconstructed and analyzed it until both the game and his opponent lay bare before him.

There was nothing but this moment.

"Ready?"

Matt snapped back to reality, eyes locking for a brief, electrifying moment with Yagami's. Without thinking the boy lifted his head, barring his smirk to his opponent.

"Of course," he said simply.

"Your serve."

Matt's smirk shifted into something dangerous and feral, before he forced his face back into its neutral mask.

The boy bounced the tennis ball on the hard packed court.

*Round and round they go...*

He tossed the ball high in what fast becoming an instinctive motion.

*... where they'll stop...*

He swung his racket back...

*... nobody knows...*

And he served.

---

"Grah!" Matt cried as he smashed the ball back to his opponent.

"Ugh!" Moon grunted as he returned the shot.

Spin. This time. Right.

*Thwak*

Counter.

*Thwak*

Return.



*Thwak*

Drop shot.

No. No. Nonononono...

*Thwak*

Got it.

*Thwak*

Shit. Fuck.

*Thwak*

Faster!

*Thwak*

His chest was on fire.

*Thwak*

One point.

*Thwak*

Just one point...

*Thwak*

That was all Yagami needed...

*Thwak*

The final rally...

*Thwak*

Hold on...

*Thwak*

Just a little faster...

*Thwak*

Just a little harder...

*Thwak*

He...

*Thwak*

He couldn't...

*Thwak*

He was at the end of his rope...

*Thwak*

Now or never...

*Thwak*

"Guh!" Matt grunted smashing the ball with all his strength.

Yagami was going for it...

Matt's mind was already spinning, preparing for the inevitable counter and how he would respond and...

"Out!" the line guard cried sending Matt crashing back to reality as he blankly watched the little yellow ball that had consumed his entire consciousness so completely, roll harmlessly away from where it had landed a scant few centimeters out of bounds.

*It's over?*

*Already?*

*But...*

"Game and Match: Yagami Raito 6 games to 3!"

And as the roar of the crowd of students (which was quite a bit larger than he remembered it being) finally registered in Matt's poor over sensitive ears, all he could numbly wonder was, " *Raito* ?"

"Boys!" an excitable voice cried from the net, drawing Matt's perplexed gaze to the frightening sight of Convict-sensei's grotesquely rose hued smiling face. The man/teacher/thing was gesturing for him to come hither... should he be worried for his maidenly virtue?

Maidenly virtue?

Matt choked back a giggle. He felt giddy, hysterical even. His arms and legs ached. His scalp itched. It was probably burned to crisp from the looming ball of molten hot iron in the sky. He felt exhausted and a part of him longed to go find a nice shady tree to hide under, but another part of him was annoyed that the game had ended so quickly. They had only played a single set. If they had played more, Matt might have been able to... At the same time, though, regardless of the fact that only pure will power was keeping him upright and that the game had ended far too fucking early, Matt was still soaring. His heart and mind were still immersed in the thrill of the game and he had to fight to keep his lips from stretching into a wild grin.

Convict-sensei was still gesticulating erratically at him. Matt barely noticed.

Yagami...

*Raito?*

The teen was already there, standing at the net, his eyes fixed intently on Matt. And those eyes... they still burned. Victory had only stoked the fires behind those deceptive brown eyes.

For lack of a plausible escape plan that did not involve flame throwers or pelting certain individuals with tennis balls, Matt's feet carried him to the net. As he walked the question whirled through his mind: *Raito* ? How was that... Wasn't his name... Moon?

But, he remembered, he was not in England anymore. In England and other Western cultures, the language was simple. What was on the page was what you had... but in Eastern cultures, in *Japan*...

Moon... Tsuki, in Japanese... but *Raito*... what kind of name was that? It didn't *mean* anything...

But there was the accent, that characteristic lisp, it could be another word, butchered and adopted because it was exotic... Well, there was the general Japanese problem with the letter "L" which they usually pronounced as an R... so that would be "Laito."

... which sounded like light.

Huh.

Someone actually had the gall to name her kid Light.

Not, of course, that Matt could say anything on the subject of really shitty names... but still, the amount symbolism loaded into that one name... who dumps that on someone?

Why was he fixating on this?

Before he could answer himself, he found himself standing at the net. Convict-sensei was grinning like a madman (or an escaped psychopath on the rampage who was secretly plotting his students' demise), but Matt found that he didn't much care what his so-called gym teacher was scheming.

His eyes were locked on Yagami... Light.

He had to tilt his head back uncomfortably in order to see the teen, and not for the first time Matt cursed his pathetic size (never mind that he hadn't quite managed to hit puberty yet and that Yagami had several years on him) and stubbornly refused to break eye contact.

"... excellent work boys!" Convict-sensei was booming loudly for everyone within five miles to hear, "Ha! And I thought this would be a slaughter match! I mean, I expected exceptional work from our Junior-Champ here, but you, Greene-kun? Ha! Knocked me out of the park you did! I had no idea you were such a talented player. Ha! They must have had you running the circuits in the Sates? Ha, ha! Shake hands boys! That was one of the best games I've seen in years..."

"Good game," Yagami Light said in English with a breathless smile, reaching a hand out over the net.

Matt hesitated for the barest hint of a moment before allowing a faint smile to slip from his grasp and onto his face. "Same," he said in English and took the proffered hand.

"You gave me a run for my money," Light said, squeezing Matt's hand firmly in his own, and sounding as though this was an unusual and rare occurrence, which, Matt reflected, it probably was. "Your style is a bit odd, but intriguing... you must be quite the competitor in America."

Unbidden, Matt's smile quirked into a wicked smirk "Eh, not really," he said, smirk widening. "I've never touched a racket before today in my life."

Light's once firm grip went slack and his red rimmed racket slipped out of his other hand, falling to the court with a loud clatter. The teen's pretty face was frozen in a mask of shock, reaffirming Matt's judgment that Yagami truly had had no idea that Matt had been making everything up as he went. The little genius thought that was

fair. After all, he had thought his opponent's name was Moon throughout the entirety of the game.

Then again, those two mistaken assumptions could hardly be called equivalent, could they?

Ah, whatever.

On an incredible high that had nothing to do with whether he had won or lost, Matt released Light's limp hand, turned on his heel and high tailed it out of there. He left Yagami standing there, gaping stupidly, surprised for what was probably the first time in his entire life, with only the company of a sputtering Convict-sensei (Ah! Puce! That was a new one) and a chattering crowd.

Matt paused as he slammed the door to the locker rooms shut behind him and let himself slump back against the sturdy wooden plank of a door. Now that he was alone he could no longer stop it. A delighted giggle burst forth without permission. And before he could reign himself in, another had broken free. And another.

And then he was laughing, loudly and without restraint, laughing at himself, at Yagami Light and at the world.

He laughed so hard he cried, but for all the pent up emotions being released in this single deluge... one feeling reigned supreme.

For the first time in his entire life, Matt was victorious.

It was an extraordinary feeling.

---

Despite his laughing fit, Matt managed to pull himself together in time to get changed and off to his next class early.

Since the room was pleasantly empty, Matt quickly settled himself in his usual spot in the back of the room and reached for his book... only to realize that he had left it on the bleachers. Shit. The redhead

chewed thoughtfully on his lip for a moment before deciding that he'd just have to go pick it up at the end of the day and hope it was still there and that someone hadn't gone and absconded with it.

He considered starting *Satanic Verses* to pass the time, but only got so far as the third word of the second sentence before he found himself caught up in his memories of the tennis match. He replayed each rally, tearing them apart in his mind and putting them back together. Next time they played, Matt would...

Hold on.

Next time?

Since when was there going to be a "next time"?

Before Matt could properly consider that troublesome thought, the classroom door opened and his "classmates" streamed in, babbling loudly amongst themselves. Matt watched them as they loitered about, feeling surprisingly more charitable than usual to their useless existences... which meant, of course, that rather than wishing for their slow and painful deaths, he simply wished for magical powers with which he could "silence" them. Heh. That would be fun, he decided and spent the next few minutes exploring the possibilities that such powers could offer. He'd totally silence all the teachers at Wammy's, for one. Those stupid gits talked too much as it was...

"Is this seat taken?" a familiar voice questioned.

Matt's head jerked up to stare at the expectant face of one *Raito* - Light - Yagami. The teen was dressed in a perfectly pressed school uniform, not a hair out of place. If Matt hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he'd never believe that this Adonis had only a short while ago been drenched to the bone with sweat. How the hell did the bastard *do* that? Ah, wait. No. There *was* something there, minimal, of course, but as third in line to be L, Matt had been trained to pick up the small things. There was a slight flush to Yagami's face and the

guy *was* subtly leaning against the desk to take the weight off his feet.

So he *had* made an impact.

Matt had to remind himself not to grin as a fresh wave of that victorious high washed over him. You can't smile; he told himself firmly, it will ruin your image.

Image? He almost laughed out loud. What image?

Still... he had to keep it in mind, didn't he? He couldn't start changing how he acted. Otherwise people might get the wrong idea... *L* might get the wrong idea.

*L*.

Matt blinked.

Huh. He hadn't thought of that son of a bitch since somewhere in the middle of the tennis match... that was what? An hour?

Now *that* had to be a new record since that jackass had started this nonsense... had it really only been a few days ago that he was safe at good old, predictable Wammy's House? He felt as though he'd been away for so much longer. And now he had managed to forget what was at stake here, to get his mind off that manipulative little robot of a detective for at least a little while, but the question was, was that a good thing... or a bad thing?

"Thank you, Greene-kun," Yagami said, drawing Matt's attention back to the situation at hand.

"Wha-?" Matt started in surprise as Light Yagami slid gracefully into the once blessedly empty seat beside him.

What the fuck? Who the hell did this bastard think he was?



Matt slammed the palms of his hands down on the top of his desk and leapt to his feet in indignation. "Why you!" he snarled, ready to let loose a tirade of abuse on this unprovoked breach of his personal bubble.

"Greene-kun!" the teacher reproached in poorly disguised shock at hearing such an outburst from one of the quietest children she'd seen in years.

The boy's mouth snapped shut with an audible click as he tore his gaze away from the intruder to glare harshly at the woman at the front of the room, not that she could tell he was glaring due to his awesome goggles. The woman sniffed pointedly as she finally noticed that Light was not in his proper seat. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded. "Yagami-kun, is there something wrong with your usual seat?"

"Of course not, Tanaka-sensei, however, I thought that as class president, I should get to know our newest student and make sure he's settling in comfortably. If that's disagreeable I can..." Light trailed off, the slightest of smirks gracing his features.

Shit. Matt cursed silently. That bastard. Now she *had* to let this go.

"No, no," the woman said with a bright smile. "You're so responsible Yagami-kun: a true credit to this institution. How could I possibly stand in your way?"

Oh however could you? Matt snarled internally.

"Go right ahead," her smile was even *happier* if that was possible.

Yeah. Light Yagami had her. Hook, line and sinker, she was swallowing his bullshit like a twenty dollar whore going down on a guy's...

"And do *sit down* Greene-kun," she added. "You're not in America anymore, and class is starting now."

What an idiot. Matt's hands trembled slightly with the force of his self-restraint. How he wanted to leap over his desk, dash up the aisle to the front of the room and smack that stupid bitch across the face. Before he could act on his rather violent fantasies, the redhead made himself sit back down in his seat.

A few moments later, the woman's back was turned as she wrote on the board all the while chattering about something he knew backwards and forwards and was more qualified to teach than she was.

Bitch.

Minutes into the lecture, Tanaka-sensei had already lost nearly the entire class. A couple bookworms were studiously taking notes, but the rest had quickly fallen into their usual habits of whispered conversations or gaming behind their notes (like that one lucky jerk a few seats away). Needless to say, everyone seemed busy enough.

Perfect.

Matt whirled to face the brunette by his side. The bastard was staring at him. Fuck. Fuck him. This was so not cool.

"What are you doing?" the redhead hissed quietly at the unruffled brunette.

Yagami smiled. The fire in his eyes had dimmed a little since the match, but it was still there. And Matt had no idea what that meant.

"You're interesting," Light said softly in English, as though that ambiguous statement answered everything.

And perhaps it did. Because for the life of him, Matt couldn't help but instinctively understand what the teen genius was getting at.

"As are you," Matt returned the statement without thinking.

Once again, brown eyes met green through tinted lenses and *something* unnamed passed between them. Matt found himself recalling the rush of the game, the incredible high of victory, of fighting and improving and struggling with all his might. What he wouldn't give to feel that again. But he wouldn't, right? He couldn't. He was *Matt*, he was the sidekick, not the hero. Sidekicks just don't do things like that... right?

"So we are in agreement, then?" Light asked, the light in his eyes taking on a strange sheen.

Had he missed something?

Matt licked his lips nervously, peripherally aware that he was standing on the edge of something very important. A part of him knew that he should be running for the hills, throwing himself off a bridge, doing *something* to get the hell out of Dodge, because if he didn't, things would change.

Then again, perhaps they already were.

But that light in his eyes, this *feeling*... without thinking Matt nodded jerkily.

Light smiled. And for once, it actually reached his eyes.

"Good."

At that Matt's stomach twisted uncomfortably. The conversation, if it could be called that, flashed through his mind as Matt desperately tried to figure out what the fuck that even *meant*.

Good?

No. No this was the opposite of good. This was bad. Very bad.

Fuck it.

And he didn't even know what he should say to Li- err, Yagami. He should tell the bastard to go fuck himself, but just as how Matt should have refused to play that stupidly wonderful game of tennis, Matt was well aware that that "should" meant nothing here.

He didn't *want* Light to leave him alone.

And there's the rub.

Matt's head hit his desk with a solid thump that he knew was probably drawing stares. He just couldn't give a flying fuck. Because, well, shit.

What the hell had he gotten himself into?

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So, yeah. What do you think?

I sort of sped through the tennis match, but if I hadn't it might have taken up like five chapters or something ridiculous like that...

Some important stuff happened in this chapter since it's something like a turning point in the story. Even though things are starting to change, I hope that Matt and Light are still in character.

Oh, and if there are any artists out there it would be unbelievably wonderful to see some fanart or fan-comics of either the look of Light's face when Matt tells him he's never played before or of Matt freaking out when Light sits with him. If you do make something, please let me know! I'd love to see your work!

In any case, I hope the chapter met or exceeded your expectations.

Please tell me what you think; constructive criticism is always appreciated and hearing from you guys always makes my day! (Besides, it's great incentive to get to work on the next chapter!)

Until next time

## Chapter 9

So... yeah, I know it's been almost a year. There's no excuse really. But I hate when authors abandon stories, so I'm going to do my best to finish this one. This chapter was originally supposed to be a few thousand words longer, but I cut it short to get it out sooner, since I figured I should let people know I'm still alive. (The cake is still a lie, though.)

I'd really like to thank all my lovely, patient reviewers who constantly inspire me to work on this fic (honestly, rereading your reviews really helped me get re-inspired to finish this thing): **UchidaKarasu**, **AuraBlackWolf**, merichuel, **Jedi Master Bag**, random logic person, **Sjezza**, silly, **Dance Away**, **Shinra'sCrazyTurk**, **mehhdroopyL**, **Ryanfan14**, **atomish**, **Rose-TheDaughterofHades**, **Sun Syndrome**, **K-Danuve**, **Wolfwhispers**, and Loveit. I love you all from the bottom of my heart! I may be a bit changeable when it comes to the lure of other fandoms, but I will always come back to you!

By the way, for those interested, my plea for fan art of the last chapter was answered! **AuraBlackWolf**, who is a wonderful godly person, drew me some lovely fan art that can be found here: <http://lawlietlover.deviantart.com/art/Motivation-Chapter-7-Fanart-157594996>. Thanks again for the lovely the artwork **AuraBlackWolf**!

Please enjoy...

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## Chapter 8

It was official: Matt had a stalker.

Sure, the word "stalker" technically implied that said person was doing creepy things like taking awkward pictures of him, stealing his

stuff for private pagan ritual alters and leaving phone messages rife with heavy breathing... but as far as Matt was concerned, the term was more than accurate. In fact, the term so precisely described the situation that Matt considered stamping the word on the bastard's forehead in permanent ink. Not that that would stop him, oh no. But at the very least it would prove a point.

The point being quite simply that Light I'm-A-Stalker Yagami. Would. Not. Go. Away.

From the moment Matt stepped foot on school property at the beginning of the day, he was *there*. Yagami stuck to the redhead's side like glue: sitting next to him in class, partnering with him in gym and shadowing him at lunch. The stupid bastard even followed him into the bathroom! Granted, Yagami had only started doing *that* after he'd caught Matt trying to crawl out the tiny second story bathroom window during lunch one day. Matt had only been at it for a few minutes when Yagami barged in.

Apparently, Matt took 4.2 minutes plus or minus one when he went to the bathroom, and Yagami had grown "concerned" when Matt didn't reappear as expected.

Bastard.

Who *does* stuff like that?

Well, besides Matt.

He could, after all, predict every Wammy Resident's daily schedule and mannerisms down to the minute, and Mello's down to the second.

But still, they'd know each other for, what, a week? Two?

Light Yagami was such a freak.

Matt groaned and sunk lower in his seat. What had he done to deserve this? What horrible sin had he committed in a past life that the nonexistent Powers That Be felt the need to punish him *now* ? Hadn't he suffered enough?

And he wished these losers would just fucking stop *staring* at him.

He could feel the gawking gazes of countless busybodies everywhere he went on school grounds. His ears still pricked with remembered strains of gossip overheard as he sulked purposefully through the hallways, Yagami, as always, glued to his side like some kind of exotic leech.

" *That's him, isn't it?*"

Ugh, didn't these people have anything better to do?

" *Greene Matto-kun.*"

And why was it so damn hard to pronounce his name correctly?

" *Did you hear about his match with Yagami-kun?*"

Why couldn't people just shut up about that?

" *Really? That can't be right.*"

" *No, you heard right, he matched Yagami move for move.*"

" *But he's so scrawny!*"

" *I heard they tied.*"

" *No, no, Yagami won, of course, but I heard...*"

Of course? He's not a god. These people really need to get over themselves.

" *His scores are off the charts.*"

*" Another Yagami then. Big whoop."*

*" He apparently doesn't wear the normal uniform."*

*" Something about a skin disease, right?"*

Well, that particular rumor was good for a laugh. Skin disease. Sure. Why not?

*" Did you hear?"*

*" He and Yagami-kun are best friends now. They go everywhere together."*

*" No way!"*

Eh?

*" Well, it makes sense, doesn't it? Those two are on a whole different level from us mere mortals."*

*" I'm so jealous!"*

Best friends? Matt snorted. As if.

He and Yagami were not *even* friends, let alone *best* friends. That titled belonged to Mello and Mello alone. No one else.

People were so delusional. Yagami was just... just...

Yeah. So, he had no idea what Yagami was up to. Fuck.

A ball of paper landed unceremoniously in the private airspace also known as Matt's lap, thoroughly derailing the boy's train of circuitous musings. The redhead blinked slowly in surprise and wondered whether he would be better off ignoring the foreign object in his lap.

A quick glance around the room told him what he'd already known. No one had noticed the note passing. Matt bit back a sigh and took a



moment to glare at the author of the note, but Yagami appeared to be completely absorbed in the teacher's lecture, as if he didn't already know this subject better than the teacher himself.

Matt kept his face studiously blank as he surreptitiously smoothed out the paper. Arabic, again. It was a language that Matt did not officially know but had picked up in one of his pre-Wammy orphanages. The red head didn't know what game Yagami thought he was playing with these notes. Was it some kind of test?

This was the first time that the Yagami had repeated a language in one of his little notes. Matt could not help but wonder why the teen was changing his tactics now, especially since the redhead had been studiously ignoring the notes and their mildly intriguing comments on a wide variety of subjects. He'd read them, of course, he was too bored not to, but he hadn't responded to any of them. But... now that he thought about it, regardless of whether or not he actually, responded, the fact that he had taken the time to read them told Yagami that he had understood and therefore *knew* each of those languages.

So much for giving nothing away.

What a tricky bastard. He now knew that Matt spoke or could at least read a good handful of languages, some of which Matt wasn't supposed to know according to Wammy's records. But then why would Yagami change the pattern in his notes?

There'd be no reason to alter an already subtle and effective strategy... unless the old pattern was obsolete. Yagami must have maxed out all of the languages he knew... but then why go back to Arabic?

Well, Matt decided, it wasn't as though it mattered what Yagami was doing or why, because Matt was definitely not going to respond. Answering the note would do nothing more than encourage stalker boy and fostering this ridiculous behavior was the last thing he wanted to...

Hold on.

What was wrong with this note? It was in Arabic, yes, but the message didn't mean *anything* ; it was utterly nonsensical and... oh, it must be a code.

Despite himself, Matt sat up a little straighter in interest.

He knew that he should ignore the note, shouldn't even look at it. But he was just so *bored* . There was nothing to *do* ; class was a joke, he'd finished all his books ages ago and hadn't had a chance to pick up more due to his persistent stalker refusing to leave his side. It had gotten to the point that his Wammy's House work, which was now taking about ten hours to complete each day and consequently left him little other free time, was the most interesting thing available to him. He couldn't even bring his "extracurricular" homework to work on at school during the day without appearing ridiculously suspicious.

Before he even realized what he was doing, Matt was halfway through decoding the note. At that point he figured he might as well finish. The code was clever he mused: nothing too difficult, but still original enough that he had to put forth at least some effort in order to solve it... ah, that was what Yagami was up to. He was still testing the waters. Now that he knew what languages Matt definitely knew, he was branching out to codes, nothing too simple to start with, obviously, but nothing terribly difficult either. Yagami was smart, Matt knew, even if he was a complete jerkass.

Luckily, Yagami's little game went both ways. The teen may know some of the languages Matt knew, but in turn, Matt knew every language Yagami knew. And so, almost without thinking, Matt found himself composing a reply to the teen's missive in a tried but true Chinese code that dated back more than a couple thousand years. Then he was scrawling out his response on the back of the original message and shoving the paper back into Yagami's waiting hands.

The teen smirked like this was some sort of victory, and in a way, it was. For all his excessive stalkerish tendencies, Yagami could barely get Matt to give him the time of day; much less actually *talk* to him. That note was the first meaningful linguistic exchange to pass between them since the day Yagami had forcefully attached himself to Matt's side.

Matt supposed that Light was probably feeling pretty damned proud of himself. Fucker. If Matt wasn't so bored (and partially looking forward to Yagami's response) he'd never have bothered. What Matt wouldn't give to reach over and knock that grating smile off that stupid, perfect face.

All violent tendencies took a back seat, though, as Yagami pulled out another sheet of notebook paper and started scrawling out a reply. And though he knew it was a bad idea, Matt took the finished note from the brunette (this one was coded in English) and formulated his own response (written in binary, just to be contrary).

Nevertheless, he was caught, hook, line and sinker, by the dual netting of fascinating codes and absorbing conversation. If nothing else, Yagami Raito really had some interesting ideas about international law... not that Matt particularly cared about the intricacies of such things, but it was something mildly interesting to talk about.

Note after note passed between them until Yagami had an impressive pile of crumpled paper accumulating beneath his chair. Finally growing irritated with the inefficiency of all the loose sheets, Matt pulled a blank notebook out of his nearly empty backpack and handed it to Yagami alongside his most recent response. The teen seemed confused for about half a second, but quickly caught on to Matt's intention.

Matt watched out of the corner of his eye as Light flipped the notebook open to the first blank page and began to pen his response. The redhead could practically feel Yagami's smugness as Matt snatched the notebook back the moment the teen withdrew his

pen from the page, but he quickly forgot to be irritated as he became completely absorbed in their coded conversation.

---

Matt nearly jumped out of skin at the sounding of the final bell. His hand froze over his half finished note and after the moment of shock passed, felt his heart sink a little in disappointment.

The code he'd been using had been one of his own design, made up a few years ago as a midterm project for his "Crafting and Cracking of Codes" class. Matt had been looking forward to seeing how long it took Light to crack this one, after all, his instructor at Wammy's had struggled over it for two weeks before finally cracking it. Of course, the instructor had taken three and a half weeks to solve Mello's and had been reduced to tears by Near's maliciously unintelligible code. The poor fool gave up after a month and a half and nearly resigned in shame at having been bested by a seven year old boy.

Still, Matt had been looking forward to seeing how long it would take brilliant Yagami Raito to break the code. Especially since he'd found a hole the size of a 747 in Yagami's argument and had been preparing to take advantage of it with a very carefully worded riposte... but he'd run out of time. So much for a decisive victory.

Biting back a sigh, Matt moved to push the unfinished note into Yagami's hands, but the teen waved him off, a tiny smile playing about the corners of lips. "Tomorrow," Light said.

Matt said nothing, but his fingers tightened around the edges of the notebook as he regarded Yagami through tinted lenses.

It's a trap, he thought. He immediately understood that the only way to salvage this situation would be to rip the notes to shreds, perhaps even right now, in front of this pretty faced manipulative bastard and never so much as look at Yagami again.

But he didn't.

Instead he flipped the notebook closed, shoved it into his backpack, swung the backpack onto one shoulder as he'd seen other students at Daikoku do (they had no backpacks at Wammy's) and left the room without a word. For once, Yagami didn't attempt to accompany him to the edge of the school's property. The bastard was probably too busy gloating to bother today... either that or he was strategically giving Matt space to further cement the victory of his note-passing gambit. Then again, it could always be both, or none of the above. Matt could only speculate about these things, after all, he couldn't exactly *ask* the bastard what his motives were, now could he?

Besides, even though it galled him to admit that their coded conversation had been... fun, the truth was that it had been. Fun, that is. His stimulus deprived mind had greedily latched onto the exchange and for the first time in days or perhaps weeks, Matt was truly engaged in something. Which is why, common sense aside, Matt didn't bother to delude himself into thinking that he wouldn't be bringing a coded treatise on every last flaw in Light Yagami's argument with him in his backpack come tomorrow morning. This exchange was a true challenge, a game like no other he had ever played. And Matt always was a sucker for a good game.

---

Matt stanchly refused to start working on his response to Yagami the moment he entered his apartment. There were several reasons for this decision. One of the most prevalent of these was grounded in the fact that he'd be letting Yagami score way too many points if he seemed too eager in his writing. Not of course that Yagami would be able to tell something like that, but it was the principle of the thing that mattered as far as Matt was concerned.

Besides that, he was not naïve enough to believe that he was actually afforded the luxury of privacy in his snug little abode. Just because he'd seen neither hide nor hair of the Ignoramus in quite some time, didn't mean the man wasn't a constant presence in the apartment. *Someone* had to be bringing Matt food and exchanging the old homework for the new. And just because Matt hadn't found

any bugs in his tri-weekly bug hunts didn't mean they weren't there. L was tricky that way.

In any case, Matt wasn't about to let L and his posse of attendants onto this development in his acquaintanceship with Yagami. It wasn't any of their business. And they might get the wrong idea... though what exactly that wrong idea might be, Matt wasn't exactly sure...

On top of that rested the most vital reason for his decision, which was quite simply that Wammy's had to come first, or rather, *Mello* had to come first. If Matt procrastinated and wasted essential time on that stupid note before taking care of his homework, he might get tired and make a mistake. The error in his calculations was slowly becoming greater as his time away from Wammy's House increased by the day and he couldn't afford to waver the slightest bit in any direction. His position as third hinged on how vigilant he was, especially now, cut off from the system as he was.

So, upon return to his apartment Matt fixed himself dinner and then sat down to do his Wammy work.

Hours later, his completed work piled high on the kitchen counter, the redhead lay curled up on the couch in the entryway. One arm dangled over the edge of the sofa, a pen held loosely between lazy fingers. His other arm, curled around his notebook, made a comfortable pillow as the boy dozed over his finished note, a smile on his face.

---

Three weeks had passed since the beginning of Matt's written correspondence with Light Yagami. The two of them had been passing notes at an ever increasing pace since that first day. They had quickly filled up Matt's notebook and had started another as their penned expositions meandered from international law to philosophy and from there to psychology and economics.

Most days, Matt found himself so absorbed in their written debates that he barely noticed the coming and going of the teachers that

were pathetically attempting to educate him. Luckily, after the first few unpleasant attempts, the teachers now knew better than to call on him. Just because he wasn't paying attention, didn't mean he couldn't pull the correct answer out of his ass and make *Sensei* look like an idiot.

Light Yagami played a similar game with the idiots who likened themselves to intellectuals. He was just nicer about it. Matt was always something between amused and annoyed as he watched Yagami string their teachers along like the fools that they were. A polite smile and some smooth talking was all it took to have them forget that Light *hadn't* been paying attention to the lesson. After all, perfect Raito always knew the correct answer even though he may not *seem* attentive; he was the best in the school for a reason. *Of course* . Yagami-kun could obviously do no wrong.

These little displays always ended with the sensei in question looking ashamed for doubting Yagami and Matt feeling a little disgusted with the entire charade.

The show was fun to watch at first, but it got old rather quickly, and Matt didn't know why Yagami bothered. He liked to think that he didn't care one way or another about what Light Yagami did and why; he was just irritated that Yagami was wasting more time than necessary on those kowtowing imbeciles, when he could be finishing one of his responses to Matt. That was all.

However, on the rare occasions that Matt allowed himself to analyze his personal shadow he often wondered about Light's façade. Matt had never met anyone so painfully conscious of how he appeared to others. At Wammy's, the only thing that mattered was one's skill and intelligence. Yagami had all that, but for some strange reason, he also seemed to care an inordinate amount about what people *thought* about him.

Matt didn't get it.

Then again, he didn't really *want* to get it. Though most of the anger that had fueled him during his first days in Japan was long gone, Matt was still very aware that Japan was *not* his home. He was *not* happy here and he never would be. He was resigned to the fact that he was trapped, for now, and was making the best of it, but that was it. Yagami's notes were the breath of fresh air that kept him from walking into traffic out of sheer boredom, nothing more.

Breath of fresh air or not, though, it didn't change the fact that Yagami's little fan club was the most exasperating group of hangers-on Matt had ever had the misfortune of being forced into close contact with in his entire life. Unlike Linda's little clique at Wammy's, these morons lacked even the saving grace of considerable intelligence. Matt didn't know why Yagami put up with them and normally wouldn't care, but because they were Raito-kun's devoted "friends" they felt the need to congregate around Light and by extension Matt (once they realized that Yagami could not be convinced to leave the redhead's side) at every opportunity.

Their only saving grace was that they liked to pretend Matt didn't exist. That did not, however, make them any less annoying, especially since Yagami had been paying them less and less attention over the past few weeks. The more cursory Yagami's comments to them were, the more determined the lot of them seemed to get.

This ultimately transformed lunch into a daily test in patience, and Matt's infinite supply was quickly running out.

---

The day that Matt and Yagami used up a quarter of their newest notebook, they spent their lunch break in the classroom as they always did. Matt sat silently, not eating, and studiously ignoring Light's intent gaze. Matt was carefully considering his next response and was enjoying making Yagami squirm. The redhead knew very well that it killed Light to stay quiet during the one time they could talk freely, but Matt had been steadfast in his refusal to speak to the



Japanese teen and Yagami had finally given up talking as a method of drawing Matt out.

Matt did not delude himself into thinking of this as a victory, merely as indication that Yagami didn't want to look like an idiot by talking to someone who refused to respond. Still, Matt appreciated Light's silence. He just wished Yagami's little disciples would get the message and join the club of silence too.

The red head resisted the urge to snort. Those fools never seemed to stop talking. Every lunch period they would pull their chairs up to Yagami's desk and proceed to fawn. Loudly. With every passing day their chatter rose in height. That day, the noise was climbing to unprecedented levels.

They wanted Light's attention, his approval, his opinions, his conversation... and they felt the need to exclaim their desires at the top of their lungs, all at the same time.

Matt's hand tightened reflexively on his pencil. How on earth could Yagami just ignore these idiots? Endless hours spent with the walking noise box that was Mello had managed to inure Matt to most background noise, but this deafening roar was wreaking havoc on Matt's already sensitive ears.

"Just a little longer," Matt silently assured himself. Lunch couldn't possibly last forever, could it?

Really, though. Couldn't time be made to speed up a little? Just this once? Their babble was giving him a headache and...

Wait a second. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks.

Why was he sitting there? His pencil slipped from his fingers and hit the desk and rolled onto the floor with a light clatter. He didn't bother to retrieve it.

He didn't have to deal with this.

He could leave.

As soon as it dawned on him that he was not in fact chained to his desk, Matt slammed his palms down flat on his desk and surged to his feet. His abrupt movement startled Yagami's fan club into silence, but Matt paid them no mind. He glanced at Yagami "Raito" out of the corner of his eye before stalking out of the room.

---

A little over a minute later, Light Yagami followed him into the hallway. His "friends", however, did not.

Matt leaned against a row of lockers a little down the hallway. He was quite adamantly not waiting for Yagami, merely trying to think of a nice quiet place to spend the rest of the break.

Yagami saved him the trouble, indicating with a tilt of his head and a slight smirk that he knew a quiet place.

The red head said nothing, but followed Yagami's lead, easily falling into step beside the teen. As they walked down empty hallways Matt found himself wondering darkly when exactly he had become so transparent that this complete stranger could know what he wanted without him saying a word. It did not occur to him that he had understood Yagami's wordless communication as easily as Yagami had understood his.

Yagami stopped in front of a metal door that stood out from the plain wooden doors that lined the rest of the halls. Matt watched as the teen pulled a key ring from a pocket, singled out a key and unlocked the door, pulling it open to reveal a staircase.

Without a word, Yagami went up the stairs and Matt followed. There was another door at the top of the stairs which Yagami unlocked with a different key. That door opened to the outside air.

The roof? Matt frowned thoughtfully. Considering the two locked doors that blocked this place off, this must be against the rules. He

said as much to Yagami, not because he cared, but because he assumed that rule abiding Raito-kun would.

To his surprise, Yagami just laughed. It was a strangely honest laugh, sounding inexplicably rusty, as a clinical voice in the back of Matt's head noted automatically. The red head found himself wondering how often Yagami laughed because he genuinely found something funny.

"Of course it's against the rules," Light Yagami said once he stopped laughing.

"More specifically," he continued, adopting a stilted professional tone, "section F of the student handbook stipulates that 'no student may leave the school building during the day without written faculty permission, except for specific supervised activities. The following areas are out of bounds without special permission: 1) the auditorium, stage area, and pit, 2) the boiler room... and 5) the school's roof. Students violating the Out of Bounds rules will be subject Daikoku Academy's disciplinary process, with penalties ranging up to and including Saturday detention.'"

Matt snorted. Light Yagami certainly was something, he thought, even if Matt was not quite sure what that something was. In his head he compared Light's behavior to how Mello would act in a similar situation. He could see Mello wanting to hang out on the roof even though it was against the rules... but Mello would never read a rule book, let alone memorize it just to know exactly what he could and couldn't do. Despite the superficial similarities the two seemed to share, in the end all Matt could see were the ever increasing differences between his best friend and this rather baffling Japanese teenager.

"Above the rules then, are you?" Matt remarked quietly. "Didn't think you had it in you. Bravo."

Yagami shrugged off the mocking comment with a little half smile, "Not exactly, Greene Matto-kun, but given my... ah, considerable

contributions to the reputation and standing of Daikoku, they would probably forgive me for anything short of murdering a fellow student in front of the school board. They might put me on probation for that one."

The blunt honesty of that statement startled a loud guffaw out of Matt. He laughed long and hard, finally sinking to gritty surface of the roof, gasping desperately for air as he went. The look on Yagami's face at his reaction just made him laugh even harder.

"I don't see why you find that funny. It's merely the truth," Yagami countered in flawless English once Matt's laughter had died down a bit. "Besides, don't tell me that you have a problem with me taking some liberties with rules you barely deign to notice."

Matt gave the teen a blank look.

Yagami sighed. "Lack of uniform, three demerits for the first infraction," he said in that same stilted cadence, back to Japanese again, "Continued noncompliance with the dress code will result in proper disciplinary action by the school. That alone should see you serving detentions daily, and that's not even factoring in your rudeness, antisocial behavior and general disrespect to everyone, especially the teachers."

The red head shrugged, it hadn't even occurred to him that those things might get him in trouble, much less get him "disciplined" by the school. Regular schools were strange places. "I'm not a people person," he said finally, though he wasn't sure why he felt the need to explain himself. "And I don't do uniforms. It's in my file."

"I know," Raito said, switching to English without missing a beat.

"I was under the impression that it was just as illegal to look through the private files of others in Japan as it was in America," Matt noted lightly in Japanese.

The teen frowned in honest confusion. "What are you talking about, Greene-kun?" The honorific sounded strange alongside that perfect Midwestern American English.

Matt glanced up at Yagami from beneath shaggy red bangs and tinted goggles and despite himself, admired the other's impressive acting skills. "You're good," he said, "but don't bother. It's a waste of your time."

Light's perplexed expression melted into a smirk. "Is it? Forgive me then, but I was sure that bending the rules a little wouldn't bother *you* in the slightest."

"It doesn't," Matt said easily, tilting his head back so that he could look at the cloudless blue sky. "I don't give a fuck one way or another."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me at all," Yagami said (finally settling back into Japanese) as he lowered himself to sit beside the red head.

Matt stiffened at the unexpected move but forced himself to continue the conversation as though nothing had happened. "I'm very surprising," he said blandly in Chinese.

"You are," Yagami agreed easily, also in Chinese, before continuing in Japanese, "Except when it comes to authority. You seem to take a great deal of pleasure in spitting in the eye of authority figures everywhere."

The redhead considered this statement and resisted the urge to laugh in Yagami's face. The bastard thought he had Matt figured out. He thought Matt had problems with authority... and Matt *did*, but not in the way that Yagami imagined. "I'm not spitting at anyone," Matt said, deciding to stick to Japanese for the rest of the conversation regardless of what Yagami did. "I just don't care."

Yagami Raito didn't miss a beat and though Matt couldn't see him, due to how they were seated, he knew that the teen's eyes were alight with curiosity. "Why not? If you keep going like this it's going to land you in trouble."

The redhead considered the warning, wondering briefly if Yagami was talking specifically about his in-school behavior or about Matt's disdain for all authority figures in general, before dismissing the advice from his mind. Yagami really didn't know what he was talking about. Matt would be stuck in this hellhole as long as L wanted him there, not a moment more or less. The idiots that ran this place had little to no say in the matter. Besides, Matt was already in trouble, was already being punished for the unforgivable crime of actually being happy for once in his miserable existence...

Matt closed his eyes tightly and shoved those thoughts aside. He couldn't afford to let his mind wander when he communicated with Yagami. The bastard was too smart for his own good.

"What, you mean our teachers?" Matt asked, purposefully ignoring the other shades of meaning Yagami's warning had contained. "They can't touch me."

"So confident," Yagami said, eyes gleaming. "But it's not just them. It's everyone and everything. Not just this school and these authority figures. It's bigger than that. You have no interest in society as a whole and you'd gladly let the entire world pass you by if you could. You want no place in the great machine called humanity; in fact, you're utterly indifferent to it, aren't you?"

Matt's eyes shot open, but he said nothing; too surprised by the possibility that Yagami might actually understand a tiny sliver of what the redhead actually thought. Once again he was reminded of how clever Yagami truly was.

Matt needed to put a stop to this meaningless discussion, stop Yagami before he began extrapolating things he had no business deducing, but Matt knew that leaving now would be a loss he could

not quite stomach. Matt was used to losing, he lost all the time, in fact, but for some reason, though, the thought of losing to Yagami was becoming more and more galling by the day. He blamed that stupid tennis game, but the result was the same:

He wasn't going anywhere.

"Why, though?" Light continued, apparently untroubled by Matt's unresponsiveness. "What did the world do to deserve your disdain? And of course, how do you intend to maintain such a reckless world view? You have something on the teachers, fine. That's hardly uncommon, but that will hardly save you in every situation. Society takes great pleasure in crushing those who go against the grain."

And wasn't that a revealing statement. Typical Yagami, so caught up in what others wanted.

"True enough," Matt admitted easily enough, somewhat relieved and somewhat disappointed. Yagami didn't *really* understand. But then, Matt had never met anyone who did. "But, no system is perfect. One can always find ways to fall through the cracks."

"It's not that simple," Yagami said calmly in Japanese. He'd stopped switching up the languages he was speaking some time ago. Matt supposed the teen found their conversation more interesting than showing off. Should he feel flattered? "You can't just carry on as you please without caring about anything. No crack is large enough to hide you forever. Eventually your actions would catch up with you and that will cause you problems. You cannot simply remove your name from the social contract you were born into, Greene Matto-kun."

Matt snorted derisively. "Social contract? I have no interest in such things. The laws of society are only as effective as those that uphold them, and since those individuals must by their nature be imperfect, the law is also imperfect."

"That's true, but-"

"Since the law is thus limited, for anyone smart enough to beat the system the laws might as well not be there."

"So, what? Anything goes as long as they can't catch you? That's hardly a dependable plan," Yagami said cynically.

"It's a perfectly good plan as long as you do it right," Matt said easily, "and if you're too stupid to do it right you deserve what you get."

The bluntness of his response startled an amused chuckle from his companion. "Well, what about you, Greene-kun? Would you get caught?"

Matt turned to look at Yagami and smirked at the open humor displayed in the other's eyes. "What do you think, Yagami-kun?"

Light shrugged, and opened his mouth to respond, but stopped as his eyes fell on his wrist watch. The teen sighed and got languidly to his feet. "Come on," he said, glancing over his shoulder. "We're going to be late to class."

Matt hesitated, but since he didn't have anywhere else to go, he soon found himself silently following Yagami back to their classroom. He realized as he went that he had finally broken the wall of silence that he had so carefully cultivated between himself and Light Yagami. In the aftermath of their conversation there would be no going back to the safety of that silence. Not now. Even if he tried, Yagami wouldn't let him, the teen would be even more insistent than he'd been in those first few weeks. There was nowhere for Matt to retreat to (especially since he had spoken first) and the redhead wasn't quite sure what he felt about that.

Back in the classroom, Matt watched impassively as their teacher swallowed Yagami's blatant lie of an excuse for their lateness with a smile. As he and Yagami returned to their seats, Matt once again found himself comparing Yagami to Mello. Mello could be quite charming when it suited him... but he probably wouldn't have bothered coming back to class as Yagami had. And of course Mello,



for all his genius, never much cared for the type of intellectual discussions that Yagami seemed intent on dragging out of Matt. Mello knew how to craft an argument and win a debate (when he managed not to become so worked up that he became incoherent), but he wouldn't do such things for... fun, the way Yagami did.

That was another thing. Why was Yagami putting so much effort into talking to him? He could concede Yagami his desire for human interaction and discussion, but why the teen was seeking either of those things from *Matt* of all people was another matter entirely. Matt found the entire situation baffling.

Matt took his seat and Yagami took his only seconds later. Matt watched out of the corner of his eye as the teen abandoned his old half finished note, turned to a new page and began writing at breakneck pace.

The redhead waited with barely disguised impatience for Yagami to finish and snatched the notebook out of Yagami's hands the moment he finished. The teen had completely abandoned their previous discussion. Instead he had taken up where they had left off on the roof. There in black ink, and without bothering to code it, the elder of the two had picked Matt's insubstantial argument to shreds.

It was a blatant challenge.

Matt blinked once, twice and sighed. Yagami was getting way too into this, he thought disparagingly. But even as he thought that, he was picking up his own pen and mentally preparing a pointed retort.

He had decided up on the roof that he wouldn't run away from this discussion and he wasn't going to change his mind now that he was back in the classroom. He smirked and began scrawling out a response.

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So... yeah. Despite the delay, I hope the finished product was worth the wait.

I've gotten a bit rusty (especially since I was lured away by the seductress that is Sherlock BBC), but I hope I've still managed to keep Matt and Light in character. This chapter contains their first substantial conversation and I spent ages agonizing over it. Hopefully it turned out okay.

Also, Mini-Disclaimer: I am in no way shape or form a cryptography expert. I am blatantly invoking your suspension of disbelief and the Rule of Cool as justification for that part of the story.

Anyway, please tell me what you think (and let me know people are still interested in this fic); constructive criticism is always appreciated and hearing from you guys always makes my day! (Besides, you really can't underestimate how powerful reviews are in inspiring me to work on the next chapter!)

Until next time

## Chapter 10

You know, it's wonderful essay-writing reviewers like you guys that keep bringing me back to this fic. I know the temptation to just read and move on, so I really appreciate your kindness and encouragement. I'd really like to thank all my lovely, patient reviewers who constantly inspire me to work on this fic:

**phantomwillow, merichuel, Ryanfan14, DepplelCk, broken handed, Jedi Master Bag, UchidaKarasu, random logic person, anon, just-a-web-artist, KDanuve, Happiness's Deceit, Rainbowbubble, mehhydroopyL, me malum, none-4-a-name, superfan8 (x3), Moka-girl (x2), The Original Gamer, Keltzy, SeraphimXII, Helaynia (x7), Tallulah Grammar Songstress !** I really did not expect to break 100 reviews last chapter; you guys honestly blow me away!

Also, this chapter would not be nearly so grammatically correct without the help my amazing betas: **phantomwillow** and **UchidaKarasu** !

(Edit Note 4/7/11: Since I keep forgetting to put this elsewhere and to clear up the confusion, *Motivation* started a little over a year before Death Note canon starts. This means that the Death Note has not fallen yet, and will not fall for another year or so. Consequently Light is still an 'innocent'.)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I apologize. This was supposed to go out on Monday, but my computer was attacked by nefarious creatures called viruses and I had to deliver my precious computer into the shady arms of the ITS organization and hope for a miracle. Luckily for everyone, a miracle was indeed delivered and so I now present to you the most recent installment of *Motivation* !

The tension between Matt and Yagami rose to rather frightening heights as the remaining hours of the school day flew by. The class of 209C practically vibrated with the intensity of their silent debate.

Matt was writing so quickly his left hand had cramped and he'd needed to switch to his right. He barely spared the move a thought. Yagami was intelligent enough to infer a great deal from Matt's ambidexterity, but the redhead was far too focused on winning this debate to care.

Long gone were their (mostly) peaceable treatises on various topics; this was a true debate and Matt wasn't going to back down.

The moment the last bell of the day rang, Matt dropped his pen and simply told Yagami what he had to say to the other's most recent jab. Amidst the hustle and bustle that always seemed to accompany the end of the school day, no one heard the redhead speak. No one but Yagami, of course.

Yagami's expression didn't change, even though Matt was breaking his careful precedent of not speaking without provocation. The change in behavior could easily be considered a victory in Yagami's favor. The small part of Matt that fully recognized the slippery that he was currently barreling down appreciated the teen's discretion. The rest of Matt was far too interested in finding ways to rip Yagami's intelligent argument to shreds to care.

The two spoke quietly in the back of the classroom until they noticed that they were alone. Despite himself, Matt was disappointed that their discussion would be cut short so quickly.

Yagami felt the same, apparently. Matt could see it in the teen's minute frown.

Whose victory was this? What was the score?

Matt silently cursed himself for losing track.

"Come on," Yagami said across the long stretch of thoughtful silence had passed between them, picking up his bag and slinging it over one shoulder, the frown banished like a bad memory.

Matt considered refusing, but before he could form the words, he was already following Yagami out the door.

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That was how they ended up sitting in a booth at a little café a few blocks from the high school. Yagami had purchased himself some kind of bento-boxy thing. Matt, realizing that he had no money, had tried to decline food.

Yagami's reaction had been truly perplexing.

"You're kidding," the teen had hissed, somewhat angrily. "You never eat lunch and considering how late you show up to class, you probably sleep in and don't eat breakfast either. You're way too skinny. Of course you're eating something."

Matt had bristled at the implications in Yagami's words, but calmed as he recalled that thanks to Wammy's he could probably incapacitate Light Yagami in less than a minute regardless of his size or apparent weakness. "I'm broke," he had said once he got his emotions back under control.

The teen had shrugged off the excuse, and Matt knew that those calculating brown eyes had not missed a single nuance of the redhead's uncontrolled reaction. "You can pay me back later," the teen had said firmly.

Yagami refused to be dissuaded and Matt couldn't be bothered to waste the effort he would need to expend in order to argue properly. Instead, he simply ordered the most expensive thing on the menu. Light just smiled.

The most expensive thing on the menu ended up being a rather large bento box with saba and hamachisashimi, curried rice and a

small salad, accompanied by a steaming bowl of miso soup, all of which turned out to be surprisingly good, regardless of Matt's attempts to make the food taste like ash. Now that he was actually eating, he finally remembered that he *was* in fact hungry and had been so most of the day.

Yagami watched Matt devour his meal, a smug smile playing about the corners of his lips. "You should take better care of yourself," he noted lightly as he began his own meal, albeit in a more leisurely manner.

The unspoken caveat to his admonishment had been '*or someone will notice*'. Matt resisted the urge to snort into his miso soup and did not bother responding; Yagami really was rather predictable in his concerns. The teen cared less about Matt's wellbeing and more about other people's concerns for Matt's wellbeing. What twisted logic, he thought, and took a gulped down a spoonful of soup.

The teen sighed expansively at Matt's apathy. "Fine," he said, grudgingly acknowledging that Matt had no desire to discuss his eating habits. "You never did answer my question, though."

The redhead quirked an eyebrow at the question, but otherwise was far more concerned with engineering the most efficient route to get his saba from his plate into his mouth.

"Would you get caught?"

Matt choked down a rather large mouthful of food before glancing up at Light through tinted lenses. "The real question," he said, unable to keep the blatant challenge out of his voice, "Is whether *you* would get caught, Yagami-kun."

Yagami smirked as though he was *happy* to have his question turned back on him. Desperate as the teen apparently was for conversation... perhaps he was. Matt just did not understand this guy.

"It's not a matter of whether or not I'd get caught, Greene-kun," the teen said mildly, carefully balancing his chopsticks across the corner of his bento box. He waited for a second, as though hoping Matt would comment, but when the redhead didn't, he simply continued, "The point, as I told you earlier today, is that even if I *did* get caught, it wouldn't make a difference."

That was far too ridiculous a statement to be allowed to stand. "Bullshit. Getting caught is getting caught," Matt blurted out around the rather large piece of sashimi in his mouth.

Light's nose wrinkled in distaste. "Thanks for the view. I could do without the sight of pre-digested puréed fish."

Matt rolled his eyes and swallowed pointedly. "Anything for you Yagami-kun," he said, spontaneously pitching his voice higher in imitation of the teen's doting fangirls, while keeping his face perfectly blank.

Yagami's perfect mask slipped for a moment and he snorted derisively. "They really do sound like that, don't they?"

"The bane of my existence," Matt said seriously before curiosity won out. "But you were saying?"

The teen smiled, his façade once more firmly in place. "It's as I explained before: if you're sufficiently aware of your surroundings and plan accordingly, the question of whether or not you'd be caught becomes moot."

"How exactly does planning remove all those lovely consequences you were telling me about earlier?" the redhead asked bemusedly. "Because from where I'm standing, it sounds like you're claiming omniscience."

"You don't need to be omniscient to do math, Greene-kun," Yagami explained with infuriating patience.

"Gambling. Really?" Matt muttered incredulously as he realized what the teen actually meant by 'doing math'. "What would your teachers say?"

" *Life* is a gamble," the teen said, his eyes bright with conviction and his bento box long forgotten, barely touched. "Everything involves some sort of risk. There are safe bets and there are stupid bets as anyone who's tried to take a shortcut through a dark alley in Tokyo could tell you. You can't avoid all the pitfalls in the world. There are too many of them to even bother trying."

"So what," Matt said bemusedly, "you close your eyes, roll the dice and hope for the best?" Yagami would make a horrible hacker, thinking like that. Perhaps the teen wasn't as clever as Matt had thought.

"Hardly," Light retorted easily, not at all deterred by Matt's attitude. "Outcomes in life are not determined purely by chance and it's possible to take advantage of that. The trick is to be well informed. You see, Greene-kun, if you're smart and if you are amply aware of your surroundings, of the people and laws that define your world, you can anticipate both the dangers and the rewards of any action you take. Once you've got *that* down to a science, you'll never be surprised, no matter what, be it good or bad, happens. And then you can plan accordingly."

"You'd really risk everything on the off-chance things will work out exactly the way you planned?" Matt asked.

Yagami sighed. "You're not *listening*, Greene-kun," he said sharply.

"Planning doesn't negate the risks," the redhead said mulishly between bites of curried rice and sashimi. Just because Yagami had completely forgotten his meal didn't mean Matt had to follow suit. He'd never admit it, but it was the best thing he'd eaten in days.

"There's no such thing as a perfect plan," the teen agreed. "Every plan has a significant margin of error that you can never forget, no



matter how well thought-out your plan is. However, it is possible to greatly reduce the risk in any course of action," he continued, with surprising enthusiasm. "It's just a matter of calculating risk and reward until you've formed a plan of action that maximizes the potential rewards and reduces the risks to acceptable losses.

"Take our little excursion to roof as a case in point," he went on, warming up to his argument. "As you noted, there are consequences for breaking the rules in order to spend time on the roof. However, the benefits, such as a private place to talk and the chance to eat lunch outside, far outweigh the minor costs we would have had to pay in the unlikely event that we were caught. And even if we were found out, we would have already monopolized on the rewards of the experience while only paying a price roughly equivalent to a slap on the wrist that wouldn't be recorded in either of our records."

"That's a lot of thought wasted on a rather low-risk scenario," Matt noted mildly.

Yagami rolled his eyes. "The example itself is immaterial," he said. "I was just proving a point. My logic can be applied to any situation. With a little research and analysis I can craft a plan to achieve any end."

The redhead smirked. "Fair enough," he said. "But you're contradicting yourself."

"Where?" Light demanded, looking bizarrely pleased at the accusation.

"'Any end' as you say, implies that the end itself doesn't matter. If you wanted it, you could make it happen, even if it was illegal," Matt said.

"I didn't say that," Yagami said, but there was no hostility in his voice.

Matt snorted. "Like that means anything. We both know what you meant."

The blunt response startled a grin out of the teen. "Do we?" he bantered, and then went on, "That's not a contradiction, though."

"Mmm," Matt agreed, "but this is: for all your talk earlier today, you care as little for the social contract as I do."

"You say that like the social contract is a religion to be believed in rather than a reality to be factored into your plans," Yagami said. "I told you before - you can't escape the social contract. The key, Greene-kun is to find its loopholes."

"What, and exploit them mercilessly?" the redhead asked.

"Of course," Yagami said blithely.

It occurred to Matt in that moment that, with an attitude like that, if Light Yagami ever went dark side, the entire world would be summarily fucked.

He supposed that thought should have made him nervous, but it only drove home the fact that Light Yagami was one of the most *interesting* people Matt had ever met.

"Planning world domination, are we?" Matt asked.

This startled a laugh out of the teen. "World domination?" Yagami asked. "Nothing so trite. Besides, I would never resort to the lowly means necessary to achieve that particular end. I'm going to be a police detective like my father."

Before he could stop himself, Matt's face twisted in disgust at that word 'detective'. "Why?" he found himself demanding.

A little surprised by Matt's vehemence, Yagami frowned minutely before smoothing his expression back into his pleasant mask. "I want to make a difference in the world," the teen said. "So many innocent people suffer everyday and I think I can do good work."

Matt stared long and hard at the teen's inscrutable face as he spoke. The redhead took note of the tiny, perhaps subconscious quirk of the lips that had preceded that little speech and somehow escaped Yagami's rigid control. And then there were the words themselves... they rang false.

His companion was not lying, though, not exactly. Wammy's House had trained Matt in the art of lie detection. He'd had little interest in staring at endlessly looping videos learning to spot the tiny clues that sometimes revealed a liar for what they were, but he'd done it. He'd even scored third in the entire school.

Still, Yagami wasn't lying. He was... regurgitating. It was as though the teen was repeating a line he'd heard so often he'd begun to think it true, at least superficially.

Perhaps... perhaps, the odd thought occurred to him, Yagami just didn't know what he actually wanted, which was strange. It seemed unnatural to Matt that this confident, brilliant wunderkind should not have his entire life planned out at the age of sixteen.

*I'm worse than Wammy's, Matt thought to himself, worse than L. Just because every child at Wammy's either wants to be L or already knows their specialty before they hit puberty doesn't mean I should assume to limit anyone else. Why should Yagami have his life railroaded into place like the plot of a bad RPG? A guy like that, he could do anything .*

"You know," Matt said aloud, "just because your dad's a cop doesn't mean you're obligated to follow in his footsteps."

Yagami stiffened. "I'm not - "

"Sure," the redhead drawled. "Whatever. But I just don't see the appeal. Cops aren't all that powerful. Their jobs are pretty awful, honestly. Low pay, ugly uniforms, bad hours... though you'd know that, I guess." Yagami flinched and tried to interrupt. Matt ignored him and plowed on, unsure of his own motives, but convinced that

Yagami needed to hear this. "They don't even make that much of a difference. Most crimes never get reported, most criminals never get caught, and the ones that do all start to look the same after a while. Really, unless you get, I suppose 'lucky' is too crass, but lucky all the same, police work is *boring* ."

The teen recoiled at the word 'boring'. Interesting.

"It isn't - "

"But it is. Police work would bore you... and you know it."

Yagami deflated somewhat. "Everything is boring," he said, eyes drifting away from Matt to gaze out the window onto the crowded street. The brown eyes were suddenly dull, the way they had been that first day (how long ago was it now? Not a month, yet, right?), filled with the same lonely emptiness that Matt had been avoiding in the mirror for as long as he could remember.

Matt had almost forgotten that look, almost, but not quite. He had grown accustomed to the spark that had been burning steadily in those coffee colored eyes.

He wanted that look back.

"Poor baby," Matt taunted purposefully. "Shall I play you a sad song on my tiny violin?"

The teen blinked slowly in surprise, as though he'd been very far away and had forgotten Matt was there. "Violin?" Yagami muttered quietly, looking honestly baffled. "You... you actually... do you even play?" he finished abortively.

Matt wondered what the other had been trying to say, but decided he didn't care. He was satisfied that he'd managed to pull Light back from wherever he'd drifted. Besides, it was amusing to watch the teen flounder in the face of teasing. Apparently no one made a habit of mocking 'Raito-kun' to his face.

"Nope," the redhead said. "Never had the drive for it." Much to Wammy's disappointment he'd filled all his extracurricular time slots with computer classes, and while they'd wanted to force well-roundedness onto him (and others), their own rulebook had been against them. After a very memorable showdown with Roger, in which Mello and Matt had put their law and debate lessons to practice, the teachers tried to make music mandatory for everyone. That had lasted until Mello broke several hundred thousand pounds worth of priceless musical instruments. For once, Matt hadn't bothered to stop him and Wammy's dropped the charade.

"I used to play," Yagami said. "Years ago. Piano, violin, cello, flute and oboe."

"All that? Were you any good?" Matt asked, impressed despite himself.

Yagami shrugged. "I won some awards, but nothing spectacular. It couldn't have gone anywhere."

"I find that hard to believe." Honestly, the redhead wondered, who won a handful of awards and then decided to give up?

"I was good; technically I was perfect, could play any piece my teachers put in front of me, but..." The teen looked regretful as he said with a bitter half-smile, "But there was something missing. My music was empty. Expert after expert listened, complimented me and said I'd go nowhere. I moved on to things more deserving of my talents."

That explained a few things, but failed to explain why Yagami was telling *Matt* such an obviously painful memory. Yagami did not seem the type to reveal actual weaknesses to others, to anyone, really. And yet he was sitting there, freely showing one of his flaws to Matt of all people. What was this guy playing at?

The redhead's eyes narrowed ever so slightly behind the tinted lenses of his goggles. Yagami seemed sincere, so the story was

probably true... Perhaps Yagami was trying to draw him out? Gain Matt's trust by exposing a weakness in hopes that the younger boy would divulge his own secrets? Possible. But was the overarching goal? Yagami thought in terms of the big picture, so what was he trying to do, allowing himself to be lead off topic so easily?

"I'm not a big music person," Matt said finally, carefully sidestepping any need to comment on Yagami's play. "So I wouldn't know anything about that. I am partial to a bit of game music. It adds to the experience."

Yagami looked momentarily startled by the abrupt change in direction, but recovered admirably. "You're a gamer then?" he asked, the bitterness fading noticeably as he spoke.

"Obviously," Matt said. "You?"

"Not really. I don't have the time for it," Yagami explained.

Matt snorted, "Bullshit. You're busy with what, exactly? Homework? Don't make me laugh. Stalking? I'd believe that, except I'm not sure what poor unfortunate soul was saddled with you before I showed up."

"I am not stalking you," Yagami said bemusedly.

"Not the point," the redhead said, not bothering to argue the validity of his stalking accusation. Games were much more important than discussions of Yagami's questionable social practices.

"And what is that, exactly?"

"How can you not have time for *games*?" Matt asked in the same way Mello asked how people could live without eating their weight in chocolate on a weekly basis.

Yagami chuckled and peripherally Matt noted that the dullness had finally vanished from the teen's eyes. "I never really saw the appeal,"

Light said. "Besides I prefer games that have higher stakes."

"What, like whether or not you'll get punished for breaking the rules?"

"Well, that," the teen said, "and other things... I sometimes help my dad with cases."

"That's sometimes," Matt said. "What else?"

Yagami hesitated. Brown eyes swept around the café, taking stock of their surroundings before settling back on Matt. "And... I occasionally engage in, ah, recreational economics."

"Recreational economics?" Matt echoed. "Which means what, exactly? Have you been selling commodities on the weekends?" He chuckled at the mental image of Yagami on a trading floor, being pushed around by his fellow competitors as he waved his hands around in the confusing garble of orders to buy and sell. Perfect Yagami would be horribly out of place.

"Not quite," Yagami said and quirked an eyebrow at the redhead's laughter. "I'm not exactly trader material."

"You've considered it?" Matt said in surprise.

The teen sighed. "I've considered doing most things," he said, "but we were talking about games."

"We were," Matt agreed noncommittally, making it clear that he wasn't about to let the teen wander off topic, even as he resisted the urge to ask Yagami about what exactly the teen had been *considering* .

"I..." Yagami was hesitating again and Matt wondered why. He didn't get much time to muse about the teen's behavior, though, as quite suddenly a look of pure determination flashed across Yagami's Asian features. Interesting.

"I play the stock market," Yagami said.

Matt's hands tensed imperceptibly in surprise. He didn't bother stating that Yagami was too young to be investing. Considering their previous conversation, it would be a waste of breath. And considering that it wasn't that unusual for a sixteen year old to be interested in stocks, the secretive behavior was most likely a holdover from a time when his interests might have gotten him in trouble. The question was..."How long?" he asked, unbearably curious.

The teen smirked. "Almost seven years."

Impressive. Yagami had been illegally investing in the stock market since he was ten years old. Matt wondered how a young Yagami had managed it. "And how did you sketch out your risk-reward analysis on that one?"

Light rolled his eyes. "I invest under a false name. It was easy enough to set up. My parents have no idea where two thirds of my allowance goes," he said, both avoiding and half answering the question at once.

"Obviously," Matt said. "What else would you have done at *ten* ?" He sighed and said, "Only someone like *you* could possibly find what amounts to high stakes gambling more interesting than killing zombies."

"Someone like me? What are you implying, Greene-kun?" Yagami asked seriously, but his brown eyes were burning brightly. He was... being playful?

The redhead sat up a little straighter, unsure of how to respond. "Nothing in particular, Yagami-kun. You're so paranoid," he said snarkily, "It can't be healthy."

"It's not paranoia if they're actually out to get you," Yagami quipped.

Matt couldn't stop the grin that stretched across his face. "You - "



His clever reply was cut short by the cheerful ringing of a cell phone. Yagami answered his cell with his usual flourish, the slight wrinkle of his forehead the only sign that the teen was annoyed at the interruption. Matt looked away and listened as his companion smoothly explained to his mother that he'd gone to a friend's house to work on a project and how he'd definitely be home for dinner. Matt wondered at the fact that Yagami's first instinct in any situation was to lie. Surely his mother wouldn't care that he'd been slacking off? Wasn't Light one of the top students in their school?

As Yagami hung up it, Matt happened to glance out the window. The sun was just falling over the edge of the horizon, the last of the golden light beginning to bleed out of the sky. Matt felt his heart skip a beat - just how long had he and Yagami been talking? A quick glance at the clock on the wall behind the cash register revealed that he and Yagami had been at the café for almost four and a half hours.

With a sinking stomach Matt remembered the ever growing pile of increasingly difficult homework waiting for him back at the apartment. His hands began to shake as he realized just how screwed he was. There was no way he was going to be able to finish it.

Shit.

He jerked to his feet and bolted from the café, barely remembering to leave a rushed "I need to go" behind him. In his rush, he failed to realize that he'd slipped out of his rough American accent and back into his more natural British accent.

He didn't notice the slip, but Yagami did.

---

Matt trudged into class halfway through first period the next day, his hair wild and greasy, wearing the same non-regulation clothing he'd worn the day before and an irritable expression on his pale, freckled face.

The redhead barely noticed the annoyance on his teacher's face, the whispers of his 'classmates' or the concerned look on Yagami's face as he made his way to the back of the room.

He sank into his seat and stared dully at the blackboard.

He had failed. Miserably.

The boy resisted the urge to scream and shout and throw his chair across the room in frustration.

He had fallen asleep in the middle of doing his homework.

He had fallen *asleep*, like some pathetic child. And he'd woken up at six in the morning with several hours of work still to go and not nearly enough time to finish it.

Somehow he managed to scrape together a finished assignment.

But that only made his failure more spectacular.

The work was complete, but it wasn't perfect. His score would be off and the worst part was that he didn't even know how far he'd strayed from the acceptable score margins. He wasn't even entirely certain he hadn't simply failed completely. No, that was a lie, even though it was preferable to the truth. He knew he hadn't scored too low.

Damn it.

He had panicked. Groggy and disoriented, he hadn't anticipated the new class L had added to his course load and had rushed. That was his mistake. He hadn't taken the time to plan out his assignment and he would suffer for it. This wasn't some tiny slip that might be passed over as natural variation. This was a glaring error. A statistical impossibility based on his previous scores.

Fuck.

L had been waiting for an opening and Matt had stupidly given it to him.

He cursed his useless, disobedient body and his traitorous mind. Especially his mind. If he hadn't been so bored, he would not have given into the lure of intelligent conversation and spent the afternoon with Yagami he wouldn't be in this position, jeopardizing his relationship with the most important person in his world.

Matt was a horrible friend.

After everything Mello had done for him, after everything they'd been through together, it only took a few weeks apart for Matt to betray him. How could he have let his cautious acquaintanceship with that Japanese asshole trump his devotion to his best friend?

The redhead's hands balled into fists at his sides, short, jagged nails digging into his palms.

He relished the pain. He deserved it.

When the teachers called on him, he refused to respond. He stared blankly at their frustrated faces and wished he could go hide in a dark place with a game and forget that he was alive. He blocked out Yagami's carefully worded explanations that Matt was ill and not himself. He didn't want Yagami's help. He didn't need it and if he could, he'd give it back. They weren't friends. They weren't anything and Matt found that he hated the interfering asshole almost as much as he hated himself.

Matt ignored the ever increasing pile of notes from Yagami. He didn't even bother to read them. He realized now that it had been a mistake to associate with the teen. Well, Matt knew he was stupid, but he could learn from his mistakes.

He was done. If he could still salvage his position at Wammy's, he would and in order to do that he would remove the distraction that had lead him astray from his awareness.

He would shut Yagami out.

That plan worked perfectly up until the lunch break when Yagami grabbed hold of Matt's wrist and physically dragged the younger boy out of the room and up to the roof.

"What the hell is wrong with you today?" Yagami demanded as he slammed the door to the roof shut behind him. "I thought you were over this!"

"Over this?" Matt found himself snarling back, even though he knew he should be silent. He vainly reached for the protective coat of apathy that had shielded him for so long, but he couldn't reach it. And his mouth just kept talking. "What, is not liking Perfect Raito-kun a sickness? Do I need a prescription, Doc?"

Yagami looked as though he'd been slapped. "What! No, I just - "

"You just *what* ? Why don't mind your own business, fucktard?"

The teen's eyes narrowed. "No."

"I... what?" the redhead hadn't expected such blatant resistance. He'd expected Yagami to leave the way anyone else would have when he blew up at them. People had shown interest in Matt before, but it was always an ephemeral curiosity that vanished whenever the redhead forgot himself and opened his mouth. Matt was good at driving people away; he barely even had to try.

So Yagami's behavior didn't make sense. At all.

The teen glared at him. "I'm not going anywhere, Greene-kun." Yagami shrugged his bag off his shoulder, pulled a bento box out and held it out to Matt.

"What?" Matt faltered in confusion, feeling like a broken record and not knowing what to do about it.

"Did I break you?" Yagami asked snidely. He shoved the bento into Matt's hands. "Eat this. Then we're going to go back to class, and you're going to grow up and get over yourself."

Matt instinctively flinched back from Yagami's ire, his hands gripping the bento far too tightly.

For the first time, Matt realized how much bigger Yagami was than him. The teen was four years older than him and towered above Matt in height. He hadn't noticed because they spent so much time seated around each other. The realization was disturbing. He had thought he and Yagami were equals. A mistake. He was nobody's equal, abysmally inferior, he knew that. How had he forgotten?

Yagami had stopped talking for the moment, but Matt's mind easily filled the silence with curses and insults spewed from a familiar but half forgotten face looming far above him. He could almost feel the spittle on his face and smell the alcohol-tinted breath.

If he could he would sink into the earth and die...

A hand on his shoulder startled Matt out of his memories. The boy cringed and almost dropped the bento, but Yagami caught it and handed it back, no longer looking quite so angry.

"If meeting after class is such a problem you should have said something," Yagami said quietly.

Matt blinked and looked away from the intensity of those brown eyes, unsure of what to say. He wanted to be rid of Yagami once and for all. He did. But it was clear now that he didn't have a choice in the matter.

He said nothing.

"Eat," Yagami ordered.

Matt ate, silently and mechanically, barely tasting the admittedly delicious meal even though he wasn't hungry because following orders is familiar and easy. He was a well-trained dog, if nothing else.

"Good," Yagami said when Matt finished.

Matt felt lost under the stern brown gaze, but he thought he understood now what was expected of him. They weren't equals. They weren't friends. They never had been. He didn't understand why some tiny part of him seemed to be disappointed. This made things simpler, didn't it?

And when they returned to class, Matt answered Yagami's notes because he didn't know what else to do.

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Before anyone panics, I would like to remind you that while Matt is a genius, he is still a twelve year-old *child* with severe self-esteem problems and a history of abusive relationships. Is he overreacting? Yes, yes he is. That's kind of the point.

Besides that, I hope everyone enjoyed the second substantial conversation of this fic and that everyone is still properly in character.

Anyway, please tell me what you think; constructive criticism is always appreciated and hearing from you guys always makes my day and reminds me why I write!

Until next time,

-blackash

# Chapter 11

You guys are amazing, you know that? While I struggled with my bout of writer's block it was your wonderful reviews that kept reminding me why I love this story so much. This chapter is for each and every one of you. I know it takes time and thought to leave a review and I really appreciate your continued interest and encouragement. I'd really like to thank all my divinely patient reviewers who helped me pull through one of the worst cases of writer's block I've ever had: **Tallulah Grammar Songstress, Rainbowbubble, SeraphimXII, DepplelCk, superfan8, Cherry's Blood, ShinyObsessed, Moka-girl, Keltzy, broken handed, clouds of nothing, FFHelaynia, Misha2011, Sjezza, 3, TinyKoala, Dipilidopa, spence, mehdroopyL, shizukoyasu, ppurpple, Shywhitedove, xXxFluffyxXx, K-Danuve, killing u with umbrellas, Sun Syndrome, Cheerfully Shameless, Konoha's Kage, glitchy, Akanamay, Anonymous, Morpheme, Good Omens, Fujoshi101, Maevke, nee, Gladioli, Viskii, blackwingsgreeneyes, yumeniai, Kage 5243, Lazy Gaga, Kai Turner, kains, Shadowstreak, genta, HippiestHop, CherryBlossomSpring, Cooked Sashimi, Queen Yanna, aurla0, kay-kw33n, Anonymous!**

I also need to offer a huge thanks to my wonderful betas: **phantomwillow** and **UchidaKarasu** ! I might not have been confident enough in this chapter to update if not for their support.

I hope you all enjoy this chapter.

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## Chapter 10

It was easy, once he started.

He had practically been born to the art, after all. Every day of his life spent learning to mold himself into carefully unobtrusive shapes, to fit into the spaces others made for him.

It was easy; he didn't even need to think about it.

He folded in on himself like the elegant origami that Shiori (number eleven) made obsessively as she puzzled over the nature of space and time in her corner of the old Wammy library. He became blank, his mind empty of both thought and feeling; for all intents and purposes a walking, talking automaton. He spoke only because he couldn't stop speaking completely. He knew from experience that that only drew unnecessary attention. So he spoke just enough to be forgettable and carefully slipped out of their minds, like so many half-forgotten details in their miserable lives.

It was easy to become Yagami's second.

The change was slight, so minute as to be undetectable to all but the most discerning mind. But it was there, a subconscious designation that he instilled in them with great precision.

A quarter of a point there, a misworded response there - that was all it took. He had some trouble with the imprecise nature in the scale of measurement, but he made do and knew the grade reports would reveal him to always be no more than second best to Daikoku's golden boy.

Still, there was more to it than just a few numbers on a page. There was the way Matt took care to always walk a half-step behind Light, the way Matt very subtly stopped offering opinions on anything in the written or verbal discussions Yagami insisted they have.

The only difficulty, the only *flaw* in his performance was that unlike Mello, Matt didn't actually know what Light wanted.

Not that that should matter, of course, but not understanding made Matt feel like he was stumbling along blindly in a dark room filled with sharp objects and motion sensing lasers.

He told himself that he preferred not knowing as he withstood Yagami's prying gaze day after day. He needed to remember: this



wasn't home. He wasn't doing this for Yagami's sake, he was doing it for himself. And for Mello.

But Yagami was still a puzzle. He was not reacting to Matt's manipulations the way he should. The teen had first seemed convinced that Matt was ill, but as time passed Matt could sense Yagami's bizarre concern melting into baffled irritation. The guy was as difficult to read as always, but after a few weeks even their normally oblivious teachers had noticed the tension between them.

When Matt bothered to listen he caught snippets of speculative conversation from his so-called peers. There were whispers about a falling out and all manner of overblown conjecture about what had or had not happened between him and Yagami.

Matt very adamantly did not care. He had realized his folly and had reaffirmed his purpose. He wasn't going to get caught in L's stupid trap. He would carry on regardless of what happened and endure until he managed to prove to that disturbed detective in no uncertain terms that L was barking up the wrong fucking tree. (L was in fact barking up the wrong species of plant entirely. Matt was more of a bushy shrub-like... thing.)

Plant metaphors aside, Matt wasn't going to give up. There was still a chance he could do it, that he could win this unspoken battle of wills.

He'd thought all was lost that first day after his spectacular fuck up. He felt the weight of his impending doom hanging over him and found himself desperate to escape the fallout of his stupidity. Matt spent most of his time staring off into space during class, thinking about the merits of sleeping pills versus walking into traffic.

However days passed and the other shoe never dropped. Nothing happened. *Nothing* .

Not a word from L or any of Matt's barely present aids. Not a note. Not even a burning bush to give him some sort of sign as to where

exactly he stood in the world. The only indication that he hadn't been completely forgotten was the ever increasing workload waiting for him on the counter every day he returned from school.

Slowly, unable to believe it was possible, Matt began to hope that he hadn't ruined everything, that when this was over there might still be a place for him. Even with that spark of hope burning tentatively in his heart, it still took him almost two weeks to stop thinking of ways to ensure that should he go through with any of his rather numerous Last Resort plans no doctor in the world could revive him.

He tried not to think about those first days very much. He preferred not to think at all, really. At the beginning of this farce he'd had his rage to cling to. Now he had nothing, not even apathy with which to protect himself. Every move he made seemed to matter so much and he didn't want to deal with it anymore.

He was so *tired*.

And yet through it all Yagami refused to take a hint.

Matt just wanted to be left alone. That was all.

Even that was apparently too much for someone like him to ask for.

He couldn't look at Yagami without remembering it, without recalling just how small and insignificant and *worthless* he was. Yagami could have done anything to him there on the roof that day and Matt would have been helpless to stop him.

The thought made him sick. For the first time in years he was again dreaming regularly about the distant, foggy past with horrifying clarity. Every morning he awoke breathless and terrified, and as he waited for his heart rate to return to baseline he would find himself numbly tracing the patterns of long faded bruises on his skin.

If that wasn't pathetic Matt didn't know what was.

Matt bowed his head over his desk and tried to focus on the note he was supposed to be writing to Yagami. For once he didn't even have to suppress his actual opinions; the prospect of debating America's economic future seemed so banal and remote that it wasn't hard to formulate a noncommittal response. Now if only he could scrounge up enough effort to make his pen move across the page.

He didn't bother to look up as bland, faceless teacher number 4 set a paper face down on Matt's desk. He knew without looking that it was an essay he'd written a few days ago. He also knew that he would be getting an A- on the paper. It was a good score in a class where the teacher was infamous for giving only Bs, but Yagami would have an A. In comparison Matt would be seen as intelligent, but not quite smart enough to be spectacular. Yet another way to cement himself right where he belonged: second best.

Yet another victory. Another point for him. If only he could remember what the score was. Or why he even cared.

Matt left the essay where it was, but moments later the paper was snatched from his desk. He resisted the urge to look at Yagami, but gave up almost immediately. Unlike Mello, Yagami rarely took things without at least pretending to ask for them first. Such a break in consistent behavioral patterns necessitated watchfulness, so Matt turned from his half completed note and looked on as Yagami flipped through the essay, his brown eyes darting back and forth as he read.

Over the few minutes the teen took to peruse the paper, his expression became increasingly impassive until his face appeared to be frozen in stone. Only the slight tremor in his hands as he gripped the assignment just a little too tightly managed to escape his rigid self-control.

A minor tell, but it was enough for Matt.

The redhead tensed in his seat. He didn't know what he'd done wrong, but he could read the signs well enough to know that for

whatever reason, the tension had finally reached a boiling point. Something was going to give.

He abandoned any hope of finishing his response to Yagami and wondered briefly if he could escape before things went the way they always went. But no, running always made it worse. He couldn't run, so instead he tried to predict what Yagami's anger unleashed looked like.

Someone that repressed was sure to have a lot of physical energy to burn, right? Of course, Yagami might just verbally rip him a new one over whatever he'd done wrong. He might even do both. After all, why should he limit himself? Matt thought ironically, remembering that day at the café only a few weeks ago.

When the bell rang for lunch, Yagami, still clutching Matt's essay, grabbed his bag and rose smoothly to his feet, his expression still carefully blank. Matt hesitated only a moment before copying the teen and grimly followed Yagami out of the classroom without a word.

He wasn't surprised when Yagami took the now familiar route to the roof of the school. They ate up there more often than not now, probably because Yagami hoped that the privacy that had previously tricked Matt into screwing up would work again. But after that first day on the roof, Matt knew better than to let his guard down. There was no reason to make the same mistake twice.

Then they were there in the open air. Just the two of them.

For once, Matt didn't have the script of how such an encounter would go already memorized. That, more than anything else, made it harder for him to endure. There was nothing he hated more than not knowing what was going to happen. He could take anything Yagami threw at him if only he *knew* what to expect.

Yagami set his bag down beside the door to the stairwell and then turned his attention to Matt. He didn't know why, but for a moment

Matt actually met the teen's intense gaze before he forced himself to lower his eyes. Stupid. He was going to make it worse than it needed to be.

The teen breathed in sharply, but let out the breath painfully slow, as though he was trying to control himself.

"Look at me," Yagami said quietly. When Matt continued to stare dumbly at a point on the teen's shoulder, Yagami repeated the order, his voice was no louder, but it didn't need to be. Matt could hear the fury lurking beneath the surface.

The redhead looked up.

Yagami nodded curtly and then held up the essay he'd taken from Matt. He hadn't set the paper down even once since he'd taken it.

"What is this?" Yagami asked.

Matt would have preferred to stay silent, but he couldn't even begin to predict the direction Yagami was taking this confrontation. He was completely on his own, though that wasn't anything new. He was always alone, even when he wasn't.

In any case, he couldn't afford the luxury of silence.

"It's the essay I wrote last week for Arakaki-sensei," Matt answered.

"Right," Yagami said slowly. "Were you drunk when you wrote this?"

Matt blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected that.

"No, *what?* " he spluttered.

"Were you high?" Yagami continued tonelessly. "Were you suffering from sleep deprivation or recovering from a fatal disease?"

"Yagami, what are you - " Matt tried to cut in, but Yagami was relentless.

"No? So you *were* in your right mind when you wrote this pathetic excuse for an argument, this complete and utter *drivel*," Yagami said, a touch of anger finally creeping into his voice.

Matt bristled at the accusation. Before his common sense could kick in he was already talking. "So what if I was? It's a perfectly fine paper. We can't all get perfect scores from Arakaki-sensei like you Yagami-sama."

"I don't know what you're trying to pull," Yagami said, "but if you think you can just *insult* me with this farce of paper, you've got - "

" *Insult* you?" Matt interrupted incredulously, too caught up in the moment to listen to the voice in the back of his head begging him to just stop talking. "Forgive me, but I wasn't aware that the world revolved around you."

"Who exactly are you trying to fool?" Yagami snapped. "You could write better than this in your sleep. It's not just that, though. It's everything. At first I was fine with backing off, giving you the benefit of the doubt, but last night I hacked the school's records. Your grades have slipped. Oh, nothing noticeable, just far enough to make your initial scores look like a fluke."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Matt said.

"Yes you do," the teen sneered. "You always know exactly what you're doing. And if you think I'm going to take this slight sitting down you've got another thing coming."

Yagami gripped the essay in his hands and abruptly ripped it in two. Matt watched in confusion as the teen threw the tattered papers to the floor.

Before Matt could say a word, Yagami was suddenly right there, standing far too close to him. Without warning, Yagami's right arm shot out and shoved roughly at Matt's left shoulder. The redhead stumbled backward, instinctively flowing with the momentum of the

blow. Once he was a safe distance from the teen he could only stare at the Japanese youth in disbelief. What the hell was going on here? Why on earth was Yagami upset about Matt's academic performance?

"I don't understand," Matt said. Despite his confusion he kept his eyes locked on Yagami, vigilant for the next attack.

"Oh, poor Greene-kun. He doesn't understand." Yagami said mockingly. "Did you think I wouldn't notice? Or did you depend on it? You're not allowed to just *give up* ." The teen spat those last two words like a curse.

"I didn't - " Matt began softly, but Yagami was shoving him with both hands.

Matt automatically went away into the back corner of his mind as he fell to the ground. Sounds and sensations faded. The fall didn't even register. Yagami wasn't very good at this. He would get better, though. These things took time. The redhead didn't bother getting to his feet even though Yagami gave him plenty of time to do so. He was going to end up back on the floor eventually, so why should he incur more bruises than necessary?

Unfortunately, he didn't seem to have a choice in the matter. Yagami reached down, grabbed hold of the dark material of Matt's hoodie and hauled the boy to his feet.

Matt realized that Yagami's mouth was still moving, that it had probably never stopped moving, but he couldn't make out what the teen was saying. That was bad, Matt thought dimly. He was sure that Light had some very creative things to say about how useless Matt was. It was always interesting to hear a new variation on a familiar theme, after all.

At some point Yagami seemed to realize that Matt wasn't listening to him, because his expression darkened considerably. Matt watched

blankly as the teen shouted something, drew his fist back and let it fly.

Matt fell to his knees, hands automatically moving to cradle his stomach. It was a good solid blow that was definitely going to leave a bruise. But Matt didn't feel it. His mind was stuck on the words that had finally registered in his brain.

*Fight back, damn it.*

The words resounded in his head, beating on the inside of his skull.

Fight back? Yagami wanted him to fight back?

"W-what?" Matt gasped, still struggling to get his breath back.

Yagami smirked triumphantly. What exactly did he think he'd won?

"Have I got your attention now?" the teen asked and aimed a kick at Matt's head.

Matt was so stunned that he didn't have time to stop himself from instinctively dodging backward, scrambling to his feet and sliding automatically into a defensive stance.

Light laughed that strange rusty laugh of his. "That's the idea, Greene-kun. Come on. Fight me."

"I don't understand," Matt said again, but there was no time to think. Yagami surged forward, letting fists and feet fly. All Matt could do was duck and dodge, evading but never fighting. He couldn't fight. That wasn't... that wasn't him. He couldn't. What did Yagami want from him?

His mind spun in circles as his body automatically evaded Yagami's advances, but there was only so much space on the roof, only so much room to run. Before he knew it Yagami had him cornered against the ledge of the roof. The teen pressed close to Matt, pinning the younger boy in place, hanging half over the edge.



It wouldn't take much to send Matt careening over the edge. The fall was only a few stories. There was a chance he wouldn't break his neck on impact with the ground. He might even walk away from the experience.

He could even make the jump himself. They'd think he was crazy and send him away from here. That would knock some sense into L, wouldn't it?

But there was no guarantee that he'd survive it. He realized with some surprise that he didn't want to risk it. He didn't want to die.

"Yagami," Matt began.

"Shut up," Yagami cut in, and tightened his hold on Matt to prove his point. For some reason a part of Matt wanted to fight the decree. How strange. He bit his tongue.

"Shut up," Yagami repeated, "and listen to me." The teen's eyes were burning with an uncomfortable intensity.

"I don't know what you're trying to accomplish, but I won't be dismissed like I don't matter, like I'm nothing. Like I'm not good enough for you," the teen said coldly. "I - I don't need you to *let* me win."

Matt stared. "That wasn't," he tried to explain, but Yagami *snarled* .

"What, it wasn't what you intended?" Yagami mocked. "Did you think I wouldn't notice? After all the time and effort I put into you, you're going to pretend that you *haven't* been losing on purpose? That you haven't *intentionally* handicapped yourself?"

Matt realized that his hands had balled into fists. He was angry. Huh, how long had it been since he felt anything? How strange. "You don't - " he began.

"I damn well - " Yagami interrupted.

Matt scowled and spoke over Yagami, his voice loud and clear. " *You* shut up and fucking listen for once, Raito- *kun* . This isn't about you. It's never been about you. I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do. I'm second. I've always been second and it's a whole lot better than being nothing. I screwed up and forgot my place, but I've got it now and I don't need you to screw that up. I - "

"Your *place*? " Yagami repeated incredulously. Matt could almost see Yagami's brilliant mind whirling behind those burning brown eyes. "People like us don't have *places*, Greene-kun. I thought you were smart enough to understand that. We're above that. *Beyond* that on a level so high they can't even touch us. I've been trapped here alone for so long and now that I've found you, I'm not just going to let you run away."

"Run away?" Matt echoed. "That's not - "

"Don't deny it. It's what you do. It's what you always do. Anti-social, indifferent, non-conforming, it's all just a mask for you to hide behind, a way for you to make yourself *less* . You can't lose if you don't play, right? I can't even begin to understand why you bother. Let me tell you, Matt Greene, the world doesn't need more lackeys, more followers. There are billions of them all ready and waiting to be used like the tools they are."

"We can't all be conquerors, Yagami," Matt said. His mind was spinning under Yagami's mental assault. What was this guy trying to pull? What the hell was happening?

"Yes. But *you* can," Yagami said. "All this time... before you I didn't think I'd meet anyone like me."

Matt shook his head. "I'm not like you," he said.

"Yes you are," Yagami said. "Not exactly. You're hardly a replica, but your mind is... you're my equal, Matt. You've felt it too, haven't you? This connection between us? Aren't you sick of being alone?"

"What do you want from me?" Matt asked. What Yagami was saying... he couldn't mean what he was implying. The world didn't work like that.

"I thought that was obvious," Yagami said.

"It's not," Matt snapped, only peripherally aware that he was still hanging over the edge of the roof. "Please enlighten me, Yagami-sama."

Yagami smiled a slightly feral grin. " *That's* it. That strength. That's what I want," he said.

"What?"

"I want you to stop hiding. I want you to be equal, my rival, my... friend."

"Friend?" Matt repeated.

"I don't know what you're running away from, Greene-kun, and I don't care. Just stop running from me. Stop ignoring me, stop dismissing me. We are equals, we are... Matt, together - together we can be so much more. So much *better* . Don't you want that?" Yagami asked earnestly.

Matt felt shell-shocked by the strange, incredible words coming out of Yagami's mouth. Unbidden, memories of his interactions with Yagami flashed through his mind. Their eyes meeting across the room that first day, their tennis game, the notes, their discussions... every one of those moments was suddenly unfamiliar, turned on its head and shown in a strange new light. But it wasn't... it wasn't a bad change.

He felt something inside of him shift.

Light was offering him something big, something different from anything he had ever experienced. Equality and... friendship. Was

that what Yagami had been working so hard to cultivate between them?

It was an attractive offer. And consequently a dangerous one as well. He couldn't go back from something like that. It would change everything.

But, he thought, looking back on the past weeks, perhaps things had already begun to change, without him even noticing.

Maybe that was why the thought of having *that* with Yagami, the shared brilliance, the similar knife-sharp senses of humor, the conversations, the *companionship*, was appealing. The prospect of a partnership in the truest sense of the word, of being someone's equal. *Him* an equal. To someone like Yagami.

Such a thing should have been impossible, was impossible, and yet.

"Are you serious?" Matt asked.

"Deadly."

Matt nodded and without warning twisted out of Yagami's hold, switching places with the teen. He experimentally pushed Yagami against the edge of the roof, enjoying the elder's grunt of surprise.

"Are you sure about that?" Matt asked again.

Yagami smirked and pushed Matt away.

Yagami was taller and stronger than Matt, so the redhead let the momentum of the shove carry him back a few steps. Yagami followed, still smirking.

Matt realized with some surprise that there was an identical smirk on own face, because although Yagami had the advantage in height and weight, Matt was faster and better trained. The redhead laughed and threw himself toward Yagami.

If Yagami wanted a fight, Matt would give him one.

---

The fight was fast and fierce. Matt poured out all the pent up anger and fear and aggression he'd been feeling into every move he made, even as he found himself nearly giddy with glee. It was almost over too soon, but the moment Matt managed to trip Yagami, the fight was finished, even if it took him another few seconds of scuffling to pin Yagami to the ground.

"I win," Matt said breathlessly, high on his victory. He still couldn't quite believe that he'd done it. That he'd actually fought back and won. It was incredible.

"Yeah, you won," Yagami agreed. "Now get off of me, your knee is crushing my spleen. It's going to rupture."

"My knee is nowhere near your spleen," Matt said helpfully.

Yagami rolled his eyes. "Fine, then at the very least I'm going to have a nasty bruise."

"*You're* going to have a nasty bruise? Poor baby. You punched me in the stomach!" Matt accused.

"Oh, you'll be fine," Yagami said dismissively. "I was trying to make a point and I did. So I don't see why you're so upset about it."

"Making a point with your fists, I thought you were above that sort of thing." Matt raised an eyebrow at his captive.

Yagami's face colored slightly. "Yes, well, I may have been somewhat overly invested in the subject at hand and may have... gotten a bit carried away."

"A bit?"

"That's my story - " Yagami began.

"- and you're sticking to it," Matt finished.

"Of course," Yagami said. "... could you get off me now?"

Matt snorted and obligingly got to his feet. "Since you asked so nicely."

"I always ask nicely," Yagami said.

"That way they never notice that big stick you're hiding behind your back," Matt said as he glanced up at the sky and quickly calculated the approximate time. "We're late for class. Your perfect record is ruined."

Yagami shrugged. "Acceptable losses," he said dismissively.

Matt looked at Yagami out of the corner of his eye and wondered what exactly had happened between them. Equals. Friends. He didn't even know how something like that could work. His mere agreement had already changed so much. He was very carefully not thinking about the possible repercussions of his actions.

Yagami was right (at least partially) in that it was easier to hold back than it was to be honest and do his best. Not in terms of effort, because it was in fact difficult to hold back the exact right amount, but in that it was easy in terms of emotional involvement. It was safer.

However even when he made safe choices, Matt had never really been safe. Had he? He'd been *safer*, but it was just a matter of degree.

This, whatever it was between Yagami and him, was different. Dangerous.

And that was... okay.

He remembered laughing hysterically in a locker room and falling asleep over carefully worded notes and debating in a quiet corner of

a café. With those bright images dancing in his mind he could not help but think that perhaps true happiness was possible, somehow, and that it just might lie within his grasp.

Then he recalled the past few weeks of tortured hell he had put himself through. What would Yagami have done, he wondered, if Matt had allowed the teen to help? That sort of "what if" was a dangerous question, but one Matt needed to ask. Perhaps, accepting Yagami's offer was something he needed to do too.

*Happiness was possible.*

It was a novel thought. A beautiful one, even.

"Are you okay?" Yagami asked, catching Matt off guard.

The redhead realized that he'd been staring off into space, lost in his own thoughts for too long. He blinked slowly behind his goggles and shrugged. "I'm terrified," he answered more honestly than he'd intended, "but that's not necessarily a bad thing, I think."

Yagami frowned. "Am I that scary?"

"You have no idea," Matt deadpanned. "But I can deal. You might want to think about what you're going to tell your parents, though. I doubt they'll be happy about you getting into a fight."

"I don't get into fights, Greene-kun." Yagami smirked. "Clearly I was mugged. They took all the money I had on me, but didn't think it was enough so they decided to teach me a lesson."

"Oh?" Matt said. "What are you going to do with the money that's still in your wallet?"

Yagami shrugged. "Simplest solution is to hide it somewhere, however it could come back to haunt me later if I did. I'll probably treat you to a late lunch and give the leftovers to a bum. I try not to carry too much cash with me as a rule."

"So we're skipping the rest of class?" Matt asked, a small smile curling at the edge of his mouth.

"Well we certainly can't go back there looking like we were mugged," Yagami reasoned.

"Of course not," Matt agreed. "Your uniform is covered in dirt. I'm surprised you're not more agitated by that considering your tendencies."

Yagami's nose wrinkled in distaste. "I have more control than that, Greene-kun. But yes, it's hardly an ideal state. I will be changing out of this the moment I get home."

Matt snorted, but let the subject of Yagami's obsessive compulsive tendencies go. "What now?" he asked instead. That was the only question he really wanted an answer to, anyway.

Yagami shrugged. "You still owe me a rematch on that tennis game."

"You do realize I was just making everything up as I went, right?" Matt said dubiously.

"And yet you played a better game than anyone I've faced off against in years," Yagami said with a smirk.

Matt didn't particularly relish the idea of more physical activity than was strictly necessary, but he did have some daylight to burn before he could go back to his shitty little apartment. "One game," he said, "I need to be done by four thirty, though, no exceptions."

"Done," Yagami said with a smirk. "Just don't hold back."

The redhead rolled his eyes. "That certainly won't be a problem this time."

"I mean it," Yagami said and Matt realized that he wasn't really talking about tennis anymore. "Never hold back again. You're better than that."



Matt hesitated.

He thought about Mello and Near and L. He thought about everything he had to lose. "I won't hold back with you," he said finally, because Yagami could clearly tell when he did that and refused to allow it.

Yagami seemed unsatisfied with the half promise, but didn't push and Matt was thankful for that small mercy.

Nothing was solved. Not really. Everything was more uncertain than ever before, but for some reason, Matt didn't mind so much anymore. Not about this.

*Happiness was possible.* Even if he wasn't quite sure how just yet.

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So, um, this is probably obvious but if someone you know is in a funk/depression, beating the crap out of them is not an appropriate way to make them snap out of it, regardless of what Light thinks. This is especially true if that person has history of abusive relationships, like Matt.

Anyway, please tell me what you think; constructive criticism is always appreciated and hearing from you guys always makes my day and reminds me why I write!

Until next time,

-blackash

## Chapter 12

First off, I owe over half of my amazing reviewers a huge apology. I intended to post an update of Motivation a few weeks ago and began replying to reviews in preparation of that. Unfortunately just as I was about halfway through your wonderful reviews, I got very sick. And once I was well enough to get out of bed I was side tackled by midterms and a whole bunch of other real life stuff. Of course, that's on top of the fact that it's been over a year since I last updated. So I'm very sorry for getting your hopes up like that.

Still, I also owe all of my reviewers a huge thank you. Your beautiful reviews do so much to keep me inspired. Given the year I've had, you all kept me coming back to Motivation again and again despite the blocks I've been having in some parts of this story. This chapter was possible because of your continued support and interest. So I'd really like to thank all my beautiful, thoughtful and patient reviewers: **Dipilidopa, kay-kw33n, The Original Gamer, Morpheme, Queen Yanna, Joker Smiles, killing u with umbrellas, Kai Turner, Moka-girl, SeraphimXII, Unknown Variable, therussetfox, Rainbowbubble, Gladioliby, xXxFluffyxXx, Insomnia-Calling, Knockoutroundabout, Keltzy, FFHelaynia, superfan8, Tallulah Grammar Songstress, DepplelCk, mehhdroopyL, Guest, Parrot Post, yumeniai, Shadowstreak, Shade O'Killer, Samael the Parselmouth, Elelith, blackwingsgreeneyes, Lazy Gaga, Sun Syndrome, Misha2011, Sincerely-Tragedy, CherryBlossomSpring, DragonOfRuby, Ize09, genta, astrakage, kains, Bri, K-Danuve, anon, lelunalebitches, Wolfwhispers, carottal, CheshireEffect, blackstarsakura13, Agent 0r4ng3, HeartKnight31320, Nonimus, Kudatsuo-chan, Chellyisback, Anonymous, ShootingStar02, AnonymousDeafMute, babydoll8901, bookfreak1317, punpunmatt, Khorale, Tsume Yuki, GoldCoast, Mahlerman, Picas Lei-Fur, Another reviewer, Night-Owl123, and Tigrislupa (x11)!**

Also, this chapter would not be nearly so grammatically correct without the help my amazing betas: **phantomwillow** and **UchidaKarasu** !

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## Chapter 11

It was official. Yagami Raito was a bipolar freak of nature.

The day Matt agreed to stop hiding his abilities from Yagami had been good. They played a nice game of tennis (which Matt lost by a few points less than last time), had a two and half hour long discussion analyzing the personalities of world leaders in a café and parted on amicable terms. Matt went home feeling on top of the world. He finished his work for Wammy's in record time and went to bed early after indulging in some much needed gaming time.

Matt had mistakenly taken this to be the beginning of a positive trend.

He was wrong.

The next day, Yagami came to class seemingly perfect as always. But Matt could see the flaws in his façade clear as day. Yagami obviously hadn't slept which was weird because Yagami was the sort of person to always get a solid eight hours of sleep without fail. He also kept shooting Matt the strangest looks.

The worst part was that Matt had no idea what was wrong. Was Yagami sick? Had someone died? Had Matt done something wrong?

He scribbled a note to Yagami in Chinese asking these things, trying to feel out how he should respond to the teen's behavior. Yagami's expression had closed even further as he read the missive and he had refused to answer.

It was incredibly frustrating.

So much for that upward trend Matt had been anticipating.

At lunch time they went up to the roof, but before Matt could say anything Yagami took the lead almost as though he'd been waiting all morning for this conversation.

"Do you have a lunch?" Yagami asked. He seemed oddly serious considering the silly question he was asking. Matt never had a lunch.

"Do I ever?" Matt asked.

"So your host family leaves you to fend for yourself?" Yagami asked.

Matt blinked. Host family? What - Oh. Right. He thought back to the briefing the Ignoramus had given him. He probably should have paid more attention to what the man told him regarding his backstory. He was supposedly fifteen, an American, and did he have a host family?

"The onus is on me to make my own food. I just forget. Why does it matter?" Matt deflected.

Yagami frowned. "Do they know you don't eat lunch or breakfast?"

"I eat breakfast," Matt lied.

Yagami just gave him a look and Matt shrugged. It wasn't his fault he was always running late in the morning. He'd eat if he had the time. Why did Yagami care, anyway?

Instead of saying anything else on the subject, Yagami just reached into his bag and pulled out two bento boxes. "Here," the teen said as he handed one of the lunches over.

"That's really not necessary," Matt said.

"Except for the part where it is," Yagami replied easily as he took a seat on the ground.

Matt considered throwing the food out just to prove a point, but now that he had something in front of him he remembered that he was actually hungry. He reluctantly gave Yagami a point on his mental scoreboard, sat down beside the teen and dug into his meal.

He hated to admit it, but the food was actually pretty good.

Yagami was strangely quiet during their meal, but Matt let it go. He didn't mind silence, after all, and despite his currently bizarre behavior, Yagami was good company.

He was just finishing off the last bit of rice when Yagami spoke again. "Greene-kun, you never talk about your family."

Matt blinked at the non sequitur. "I don't talk about much of anything," he said blandly. After a moment he added, "You don't exactly talk about yours either."

Yagami shrugged and ignored Matt's point completely. "You're in a foreign country. Don't you miss them?"

Perhaps Yagami really was sick. He was asking the strangest things. What on earth was causing Yagami to want to know anything about Matt's family?

It was a good question, though. Of course he missed his family. He missed Mello so much it hurt. He even missed Near and all of the other orphans at the school. He missed the very air that permeated Wammy's House. Wammy's House was familiar and safe and most importantly *known*. There were no surprises there and he really missed that.

But the hurt was dulling with time. Matt still had hope that he would one day be able to go home, but in the meantime he was coping as well as he could. He always had been good at dealing with loss.

That aside, he was left with a serious dilemma. Should he answer truthfully or answer as Matt Greene, L's construct? Matt had agreed

not to hold back intellectually, but that was different from lying to maintain his cover, wasn't it? That however raised the question of whether or not he could really achieve the equal partnership Light had offered if he had to lie all the time.

He wasn't prepared to make that choice yet. Not on such short notice. How could he -

Matt realized that he didn't actually need to lie at all. While it definitely would not be a long term solution, a lie of omission could give him time to figure out what he was going to tell Yagami about himself.

"I do," Matt said carefully. "But this is too good of an opportunity to waste my time dwelling on things I can't have, isn't it?"

Yagami looked at him searchingly and Matt couldn't help but be baffled as to what Yagami was looking for. "What's your dad like?" Yagami asked.

Matt should have expected that question. He should have, but for some reason he didn't.

It took all of his strength to stop himself from tensing as memories flared up in his mind like welts rising after a particularly terrible beating.

His father. That man. Why on earth would Yagami bring that up?

"Are you all right?" Yagami asked, but his eyes were sharp.

Matt closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm fine," he said after a moment. "I... It's nothing."

"Did he - " Yagami began.

Matt refused to let him finish that thought. He refused to dredge up the past when he'd just thought he'd finally managed to lay it to rest again. "It's nothing," Matt repeated more firmly.

Yagami frowned but nodded reluctantly. "If you ever want to talk - "

"I really don't," Matt said, only half paying attention to Yagami as he finished shoving that particular specter back into the neatly labeled box where it belonged.

"I'm here," Yagami said quickly. "If you change your mind."

Matt grunted and got to his feet. He headed back to the classroom without waiting to see if Yagami was following him.

So much for that upward trend.

---

After that Yagami's strange mood seemed to dissipate. There were no more weird questions or odd looks. They even resumed their normal in-class activities of not-bothering-to-pay-attention with the added of variant of playing mental chess.

Matt didn't believe that Yagami had really let go of whatever was troubling him, even though Yagami's acting was as flawless as usual. However, he did use the much welcomed reprieve from bizarre questions to try and figure out the source of Yagami's issues.

Yagami could just be trying to get to know Matt better, though that did not explain the other's sleeplessness and bizarre intrusive questions. Perhaps Yagami was getting suspicious about Matt's rather transparent back story? But why would that cause Yagami to act so strangely?

Matt spent the second half of the day balancing chess moves and pondering Yagami's oddities. By the time school ended he had beaten Yagami twice and lost once at chess, but for the life of him Matt could not figure out what Yagami's newest head game was.

The redhead was still pondering what to do when he and Yagami parted ways outside the classroom as Yagami headed to his pointless resume building farce of a student council meeting and

Matt made his way to the exit. Matt walked with his head down, watching the bland floor tiles disappear under his feet as his mind considered and reconsidered all of the possibilities.

He was so lost in thought that he almost plowed down the three girls very stubbornly and deliberately blocking his way. Matt reluctantly looked up from the floor and blinked at the sight of the uniform clad young women in front of him. He wondered if he was going crazy.

Since when did anyone in this school but Yagami approach him?

"Greene-kun," the middle girl said earnestly. "I'm very sorry for intruding, but we, we just wanted to let you know - "

"That we're really happy you and Yagami-kun could work things out. We were rooting for you all along," the girl on the left finished with equal sincerity.

"We were so worried and it's so nice to see you getting along again," the girl on the right added with a bright smile.

"Love will always triumph!" the girl on the left exclaimed.

Matt kept his blank in the face of the strange devotion exuding from the schoolgirls and frantically tried to figure out how the hell he should respond to this. He didn't really understand girls at the best of times, especially girls who weren't geniuses, but this was even further out of his realm of experience than usual. Why was the entire world choosing *today* to go insane?

After a moment of thought, Matt decisively turned on his heel and began striding quickly in the other direction. Luck seemed to be on his side since the girls that were overly invested in his friendship with Yagami were apparently so shocked by his rudeness that it didn't occur to them to follow him. Still, just to be on the safe side, Matt kept walking until he found himself on the other side of school.



He congratulated himself on dodging that particular bullet and stopped to assess where he ended up. The hall was empty. There were no crazy people in sight, but that could change at any moment. Matt wondered if it was safe to find another exit or if he should expect to be accosted by another group of insane students. Just in case he decided to avoid any unnecessary social interaction and take the road less traveled.

Matt turned abruptly and opened the nearest classroom door. Upon seeing what was inside the room, he resisted the urge to slam the door shut again. Of course he'd pick this particular room at random. The nonexistent gods clearly hated him, so obviously he'd end up barging in on the student council meeting.

"Greene-kun," Yagami said looking just as surprised at Matt's arrival as his many sycophantic minions.

Matt could run away, but no, why should he run? Awkwardness aside, he wasn't actually doing anything wrong, was he?

Besides, a vindictive part of himself thought, Yagami deserved a little surreality in his life after what he'd done to Matt's positive trend line, didn't he?

"Yagami," Matt said, pointedly leaving off the honorific just to screw with the minions.

"Is something wrong?" Yagami asked and the bastard had the nerve to look *concerned*.

That made sense though, didn't it? Yagami wanted them to be equals somehow, didn't he? Yagami was clearly worried about the state of their agreement. But Matt felt bitter nonetheless.

"Nothing at all," Matt said blandly, shutting the door behind him with a click. He walked unhurriedly across the room toward the windows. He placidly ignored the startled murmurs of his audience as he slid the window open, removed the screen and climbed out the window.

It was a tight fit, but Matt wasn't exactly a big kid. The size of the window just ensured that no one was going to follow him. Not that he expected anyone to try, of course. Who would care enough to do that?

Matt offered a little wave to the stunned student council and then headed toward the edge of the grounds, hoping he'd headed the crazies off at the pass and would escape this hellhole unscathed.

As he walked he could hear Yagami loudly calling his meeting to order.

Matt smiled triumphantly to himself and hoped he'd pissed Yagami off enough that he'd be back to normal tomorrow.

---

The next day Yagami seemed to be acting like himself. There were no more odd questions or weird looks. The only the proof of Yagami's previous strangeness was that the teen brought Matt lunch again that day. And the next. Yagami proceeded to bring Matt lunch every day for the rest of the week despite Matt's protests.

Matt still suspected that something was off with the guy, but he let it go. There was no point in making a fuss, not when he'd rather be discussing fascinating topics with Yagami between moves of mental chess. Besides, the lunches Yagami brought were actually pretty good.

Not that Matt would ever admit that. Of course not.

That upward trend seemed to be returning and Matt began to feel optimistic again.

That was a mistake.

---

Why on earth was Light acting so strange? Who were those weird girls that were bothering Matt? Why is the world out to make Matt

miserable? I'd love to hear your thoughts!

Or just generally let me know what you think of the story; constructive criticism is always appreciated and hearing from you guys always makes my day and reminds me why I write!

Until next time,

-blackash

## Chapter 13

It hasn't been over a year since I updated! Thank goodness for small miracles, right?

As always, I owe all of my reviewers a huge thank you. Your reviews are incredibly inspiring and they keep me writing no matter how hectic RL gets. This chapter was possible because of your continued support and interest. So I'd really like to thank all my wonderful, considerate and patient reviewers: **Agent 0r4ng3**, **yumeniai**, **Wolferunner123**, **Unknown Variable**, **Picas Lei-Fur**, **Shade O'Killer**, **shizukoyasu**, Guest, Guest, **Carottal**, **Tsume Yuki**, **Rainbowbubble**, **Tallulah Grammar Songstress**, **DepplelCk**, **Parrot Post**, **PunPunMatt**, **pardum**, **Aranella**, **DragonOfRuby**, **Mahlerman**, **yugiohfan12**, **safranbrod**, **Reight**, **SeraphimXII**, **RavenRemyRiddle**, **Tigrislupa**, **Mamita**, **Nonimus**, **Roith** and **Lorette**, **blackstarsakura13**, **Matron**, **Oh Susanna**, **X**, **BlackQuill00**, **kains**, **Dorianimeyaoilover**, **suitsfan22**, **Zerone**, Guest, and **OppositesAttract**.

Also, this chapter would not be nearly so grammatically correct without the help of my amazing beta: **Tigrislupa** !

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## Chapter 12

As far as Matt knew, Saturday mornings were mythical creatures that he avoided at all costs. Waking up before two in the afternoon simply wasn't done. Consequently Matt was less than pleased about the infernal knocking interrupting his beauty sleep at...

With a sigh, he turned his head and blinked groggily at the living room clock. Nine o'clock. Who the hell was up at nine o'clock on a Saturday?

No, no. Matt knew the answer to that question. L's little minions were always up at obscene hours, probably so that the Detective himself didn't have to be. Well, the bastards could continue banging on the door like imbeciles; Matt was not getting up. They had their own keys, didn't they? If they wanted in, they'd have to do it themselves.

He turned his head away from the clock and buried his face into the space between the couch cushions. He closed his eyes and willed himself to go back to sleep. Seconds passed, then minutes. It felt like an eternity had gone by, but he was still wide awake. Matt suspected it had something to do with the persistent knocking.

Covering his ears with his hands, Matt sleepily regretted his decision to fall asleep on the couch instead of in his bedroom. His bedroom was at least a bit farther from the fucking door and the fucking fucker who was banging on it.

Unable to stand it anymore, Matt lurched up into a sitting position, got up and marched across the room.

Well, he attempted to march.

More accurately, he stumbled over the piles of books, wires, and computer parts littering his floor and nearly flew headlong into the door of his apartment.

Scowling furiously, Matt unlocked the door and yanked it open.

"What the fuck do you-" He froze, his mouth hanging open in shock.

He hadn't expected this. Hadn't even considered it a possibility.

Standing on his doorstep was not one of his L-assigned keepers. No. That would be too easy.

"How do you, no, never mind. I know how. What are you doing here, Yagami?" Matt asked flatly.

Yagami smiled pleasantly at him, as though he didn't hear the annoyance in Matt's voice. "I didn't know your eyes were green."

Matt frowned at the non sequitur. "What?"

"You're not wearing your goggles," Yagami said helpfully.

It was true. His goggles were hanging around his neck. He had hung them there for safekeeping just before he fell asleep last night. Matt roughly pulled them back over his eyes and glared at Yagami through the tinted lenses. "Yagami-kun, what are you doing here?"

"I'm not allowed to visit my friends?"

There were so many things Matt could say to that. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Narrowed his eyes. "It's too early for this. Go away," he said finally, slamming the door shut.

He turned away from the door but had barely taken a step when the knocking began again.

Twitching slightly, Matt whirled around and jerked the door open. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Greene-kun," Yagami said innocently.

"You can't just show up unannounced at obscene hours of the morning and pretend like it's perfectly acceptable behavior."

"I thought you liked to eschew acceptable behavior."

"No," Matt snapped. "It's socially acceptable behavior that I find dubious. I do, however, have personal standards of decency. If I ruled the world you'd be shot for being so fucking chipper at this time of day."

"At nine thirty in the morning?" The bastard was laughing at him.

"Yes," he snarled.

A faint smirk tugged at the corner of Yagami's lips. "A terrifying thought. Nothing would ever get done."

"Of course not, that time would be made up later - " Matt cut himself off. "I know what you're doing," he said instead.

His words were met with a confused blink and a bemused, "I'm sorry?"

Curse the bastard's acting ability. It was still too early for this. "You're trying to trick me. It's not going to work."

"It isn't?" Yagami tilted his head to the side inquiringly.

"No. You are not going to suck me into this conversation so that I mindlessly invite you in."

"Oh. Was that my plan?"

Matt really wanted to hit that stupid smiling face. But that would be admitting defeat. "Don't pretend it wasn't."

His glare was met with a careless shrug. "Don't pretend it hasn't worked. Could you honestly fall back asleep now?"

Matt scowled. "Yes," he insisted stubbornly.

Yagami raised an eyebrow at him.

"I *hate* you."

"Since you're lying so much more than usual today, I suppose I'll take that as a complement."

Matt twitched. It was far too early for this shit. Someone must hate him. "Why are you here, again?"

"I wanted to see you." The bastard had no right looking so earnest.

"You see me five days a week. Surely you're sick of me," Matt deadpanned.

"Impossible. How could I be sick of your radiant countenance?"

"Right. It's too early for this. Remind me why I'm not shutting the door in your face?"

"Because that would be rude?"

Green eyes rolled behind tinted lenses. "Try again."

Yagami smirked. "Because you're awake now and you're curious about my motives."

That was true enough. Matt said nothing.

"Which is why you should invite me in."

"I think your logical progression is missing a crucial middle step there."

"My logic is flawless," Yagami informed him loftily.

"You're full of shit."

"You wound me, Greene-kun, you really do. We're friends, aren't we?"

"I thought so," Matt said grumpily. "I'm reconsidering my judgment. Friends don't wake friends up on Saturday mornings."

Yagami put his hands on his hips and gave Matt an amused look. "Aren't you being a little melodramatic?"

"Probably. It's hard to say. Lack of sleep has clouded my executive functioning ability," he snarked. "You should be careful; I might slip



and strangle you by accident." He wasn't actually joking.

Yagami had the nerve to laugh. It was less rusty sounding than it had been when they first met. On a normal day, Matt might be pleased by the change. Not today.

"Death threats aren't funny," Matt snapped.

"Of course not," Yagami said. But the jerk's eyes were still dancing. How infuriating.

"Liar. You're still laughing."

"Wherever would you get that idea?"

Matt grabbed the door handle and tried to shut the door once more. Unfortunately, Yagami's foot was in the way. "Move."

"No."

Scowling at his unwanted visitor through the crack in the door, Matt wondered if he should try breaking Yagami's foot. Or maybe his hand. Both hands, actually. That way Yagmai couldn't keep knocking.

Yagami smiled back at him and said nothing, as though hoping he could outlast Matt's patience. A ridiculous idea, of course. Matt was infinitely more patient than Light Yagami could ever hope to be. The redhead leaned against the door frame, watching his uninvited visitor through the doorway and waited.

"Will you invite me in now?" Yagami finally asked.

Matt opened his mouth to refuse but reconsidered. Despite his own insistence he really was beginning to wake up, and that meant he could no longer ignore the factors underlying this little intrusion. Yagami *had* been acting strange all week, after all. The chances of this visit being related to that behavior were extremely high. As much as he hated to sacrifice his best sleep of the week for anything, he

had to admit that finding out what was wrong with his... friend might be worth it. Besides, Yagami was, in fact, stubborn enough to sit on Matt's porch all day drawing unwanted attention from L and his minions. *That* was not something Matt wanted to deal with.

He sighed. "Fine." Matt pulled the door open all the way and stepped to the side to let Yagami through. "Welcome to my humble abode," he said.

Cautiously, as though he was expecting something terrible, Yagami stepped inside.

Matt closed the door behind his guest and turned to follow. He promptly ran into Yagami's unmoving form.

Matt was way too tired to deal with this sort of thing. "What kind of person stops in the middle of the entryway? You're supposed to be the polite one, aren't - "

"You live here?" Yagami asked incredulously. The question cut through Matt's rant like a knife.

"Obviously," Matt muttered, his brow furrowing in confusion. He edged around Yagami and tried to figure out what had the elder acting even stranger than usual. Glancing over the tangles of wires and electronics and the monstrous piles of books in the living room, he failed to see what was so shocking.

The teen leaned down and picked up one of the many textbooks littering the floor. He opened the book and flipped idly through the pages. "The math we're learning in school must be pretty boring for you if you're reading advanced theoretical textbooks like this in your spare time," Yagami noted, closing the book and holding it out for Matt to see.

Matt blinked at the Real Analysis (1) textbook in front of him. That stupid thing had already been the bane of his existence; this was just the icing on the cake. He smiled awkwardly and snatched the book

from Yagami's hands. "It's ah, just a bit of light reading," he tried to explain, realizing how stupid he sounded even as said it.

But Yagami acted as though he hadn't heard a word Matt said. The teen pursed his lips and turned his gaze back over the room. He glanced over the spotless kitchenette before settling his scrutiny on the hallway leading to the rest of Matt's apartment. "Where's your room?" Yagami asked in an annoyingly fake innocent tone.

Matt considered being difficult since Yagami suddenly felt the need for pretense, but figured that at this point he might as well play a proper host. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, before maneuvering around his unwanted guest. He offered Yagami a baleful look before leading the teen deeper into the apartment, skillfully picking his way over the odds and ends littering the living room.

"Bathroom." Matt gestured at the room as they passed it.

Yagami paused to peek inside before following Matt to the room still marked with Matt's name in garishly vibrant letters that would not come off despite Matt's best efforts.

"It's not terribly exciting," he said as he pushed open the door.

The look on Yagami's face as he slipped in past Matt showed he clearly disagreed with Matt's assertion.

The room was as small and simple as ever and just as overflowing with technology and books as the living room. The bed was half made with plain white sheets and a generic blue-gray comforter. The only personal things in the room were his pictures and other mementos of Mello and Wammy's House. However, those were hidden carefully amongst his possessions, out of sight but never out of mind. He had no doubt that L's minions could find them if they really wanted to take them, but it made him feel better to know that they certainly would not have an easy time of it.

"Are you done?" Matt asked after several minutes of watching Yagami silently dissect his room.

The teen blinked and offered him a strange smile. "Ah, yes. I like it. It's very... you."

Matt snorted. "Polite as always. I won't be offended if my organization methods make you twitchy."

"I detect no method to this madness."

"You wouldn't, nor would anyone else, but I know where everything is in this apartment and that's the way I like it."

Yagami's smile became less strange. "Of course you do."

"Do you want something to eat?" Matt asked for lack of anything else to say.

"That would be nice."

The two made their way out of the room, and Matt headed for the kitchen.

"Whose room is that?"

Matt turned back and saw that Yagami was not following him. He was looking at the third door in the cramped hallway.

"Oh, that." His still slightly groggy mind fumbled for an answer. "That's my... ah, guardian's room."

"I thought you were staying with a host family."

Matt blinked in surprise. "I am," he said after a beat. What was with all these weird questions?

"Is he... or she here?"

"Um, not at the moment." Not ever. L's minions rarely bothered to stay the night. The room was completely bare.

... And that was probably not normal, Matt realized belatedly. "He'll be in later," he added. That was normal, right? Guardians checked in... no. They stayed, guarded their charges, err, children. Maybe? Shit. Should have read the damn briefing. Fuck. Well, at least he was finally awake. Time for a much needed distraction. "Anyway, how about that breakfast? I've got two kinds of cereal," he said with forced cheerfulness. He was 87% sure that the milk was still good, but if it wasn't Yagami would be too sick with food poisoning to notice anything odd.

Yagami rocked forward onto the balls of his feet, as though he was going to ignore Matt's invitation. But then the teen settled back onto his heels, and after another moment, turned to look at Matt. Under those searching eyes, Matt's hands twitched for a game to hide behind.

"What?" Matt said, his voice admirably steady given the circumstances. He had no idea what L would do if Matt's cover was broken. Not that it was broken. Not yet. But Yagami wasn't stupid. What if L got nervous and decided that relocating him again was what it would take to get Matt to dance on the party line?

Matt's breath caught in his throat. Fuck. Fucking Hell. He hadn't even thought about that. After everything that had happened - starting over. Again. Shit. Shit. That was not something Matt wanted to think about. That couldn't happen. He was - He didn't want to leave. Not now. Not unless he would be going home. And that was about as likely as -

"... eene-kun? Greene-kun? Matt?" Light's voice was very loud and very close.

Matt opened his eyes. He hadn't realized that he had closed them. Yagami was standing very close to him. Matt took a step back.

"Are you all right?" Yagami asked. "Do you need anything? Should I call someone?"

"I - I'm fine. It's - " Matt took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The wave of rising panic was subdued for the moment, but he could feel it lurking just out of reach, waiting to rush back in and swallow him whole. He shook his head and ran his hands through his hair. He couldn't worry about that right now. Not with Yagami here and paying far too much attention to everything around him. "Don't worry about it."

Yagami opened his mouth, then closed it and shook his head slightly. With strangely deliberate slowness he reached out and placed his hand on Matt's arm.

Matt blinked down at the offending appendage in confusion. "Why are you touching me?"

Yagami ignored the question. "Cereal sounds wonderful right now," he said instead. The teen gave Matt a too thin smile and began guiding the younger boy in the direction of the kitchen.

Rather than arguing, Matt let himself be led to one of the barstools in front of the kitchen counter. Food sounded like a good distraction, even if he wasn't particularly hungry.

He watched silently as Yagami cleared away the piles of books Matt had left on the counter, reluctantly stacking them on the floor against the wall for lack of anywhere else to put them. Then Yagami went into the tiny kitchen and began riffling through the cabinets. Matt considered pointing out that Yagami has started looking on the wrong side of the kitchen, but didn't. The kitchen wasn't that big and Yagami would figure it out eventually. In the meantime Matt could just sit and not think. Yes. That was a really nice idea.

Eventually Yagami found two bowls, two spoons, the milk and a box of cereal. "You heard that the Homeland Security Act was signed into

law in the United States, right?" Yagami asked as he began pouring cereal into the bowls.

Matt glanced up from the countertop and gave the teen a blank look at the bizarre non sequitur.

Yagami shook his head and smiled faintly. "You should keep up on these things. It's your home, isn't it? In any case, it's all over the international news."

"I guess," Matt said noncommittally as he tried to figure out what Yagami was doing.

"Don't act so excited. I thought you'd be concerned about the infringement on your privacy." Yagami poured the milk into the bowls.

Oh. That's what this was. Yagami was making... not small talk, not really. But what passed for it between them. Impersonal, but slightly interesting... and properly distracting for all involved. Matt could go with that.

"Eh. They can't be everywhere," Matt said, letting himself be drawn into the conversation. "And when it comes to cyber security, the internet is not exactly something they can easily regulate. Not for a long time at least. Anyway, after what happened last year, this was bound to happen, wasn't it?"

Yagami shrugged. "Things are tense. The UN Security Council might even stop blustering and actually do something about Iraq." He handed one of the bowls to Matt.

"You say that like the UN actually does anything to begin with," Matt pointed out as he took the bowl. He felt calmer now. Talking about something so far away from himself and his problems was surprisingly soothing. "Do you really think they even have those weapons?"

"Well, the U.S. can do something, and your president is certainly trying to build a case." Yagami sat down on the other barstool, the second bowl in hand.

Matt resisted the urge to mutter, 'He's not my president.' That would not help in the slightest. "Like I said, after what happened last year I wouldn't be surprised by anything. The last time anyone was stupid enough to attack any part of the United States - " He faltered, realizing belatedly that he was potentially treading on painful ground.

"Yes, we all know what happens when you poke the sleeping dragon," Yagami said wryly. "And considering the difference between an attack on a military base and a bunch of helpless civilians, I'd say you're probably right not to be surprised."

Matt grimaced. He didn't know why he was suddenly bothered by this, but he was. Yagami seemed fine, but the guy was good at lying. Matt could usually tell, but... Matt found himself wishing that he hadn't brought it up in the first place.

Yagami raised an eyebrow at Matt.

Matt said nothing. Yagami frowned thoughtfully for a few moments before his eyes widened. Yagami snorted. "Come on, it's not like you to suddenly develop a sense of tact, Greene-kun. I don't mind talking about it."

"Maybe I do," Matt said reluctantly.

"Why? I don't mind. My country was not a helpless victim and yours was not the sole, dominating aggressor. To think otherwise is the height of arrogance. It was a bloody, inhuman massacre on both sides. Our loss doesn't erase what we did, not to your people or... others."

"Doesn't it bother you at all?"



"The entire thing disgusts me. *Humanity* disgusts me. But it's no better or worse than anything else. The world is full of terrible things."

Matt didn't know why, but Light's insistence on being objective was suddenly infuriating. "I'm not talking about the world. I'm talking about you. Your family - "

Yagami's brow furrowed. "A few distant relatives I've never met and that I know little about died in the war, that's true. Some of them were soldiers, some of them weren't. I'm sure you know all about it from reading up on my family. But that's hardly upsetting. It happened. It happened ages ago. It can't hurt me. And not talking about it only courts the danger of forgetting the lessons such things are meant to teach us."

"I didn't realize that nuclear strikes were such a rich source of education," Matt snapped.

"Yes, you did. What's wrong with you?"

What right did Yagami have to be irritated with him? That was unfair, especially after all the shit the bastard had been pulling lately. "Forgive me for being concerned," he snapped.

Yagami scowled, but then shook his head. He took a deep breath and then said slowly, "How can I, when you can't seem to forgive me the same?"

Matt considered that cryptic statement. "For some reason I don't think we're talking about the war in the Pacific anymore," he said finally.

"How perceptive of you." Yagami gave him an unreadable look and then began eating his cereal.

Enigmatic bastard. What right did he have to derail a perfectly good conversation and remind Matt that Yagami had been acting strange

all week and was now in Matt's apartment eating Matt's food and poking his nose into things he had no business noticing? None. He had no right. But if Matt pointed that out he'd be admitting to... something. At this point Matt wasn't even sure what that something was, but it would definitely be enough for Yagami to work with. What a mess.

Matt sighed and began eating his now slightly soggy cereal. "Sorry this is all I have," he said between bites. "I know it's not really traditional fare over here." There, that would hopefully diffuse the situation for the moment. If Yagami was going to start asking difficult questions, which he clearly wanted to do, this was certainly not the place to have that discussion. Matt was pretty sure there were no bugs in the apartment. He had done a sweep recently. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

"Well, it's not particularly healthy, but it won't kill me." Yagami kindly took up the preferred thread of conversation. "Have you even had a traditional Japanese breakfast since you got here?"

"Nope. Haven't had the chance."

"We'll have to fix that."

"We will?"

"Of course. Remind me to have you over for breakfast one day."

Matt almost froze with his spoon half way to his mouth. He forced himself to finish the motion and took his time chewing his bite of cereal. 'Over', as in to Yagami's home? Was Yagami really offering that? Why?

"R-really?" he said finally, once he could no longer pretend to be silent for the sake of politeness.

Yagami nodded. "You could use the nutrition."

Matt frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you clearly don't eat enough."

"I eat plenty."

"Right."

"I *do* ."

Yagami snorted and pushed away his empty bowl. "Of course, Greene-kun."

"Hey - " Matt began, but Yagami interrupted.

"Regardless. I would be honored to have you visit my home."

"Well, if you'd be *honored*, how can I possibly say no?"

Yagami just looked at him.

Matt sighed. "Fine, fine. You're like a dog with a fucking bone, you know that?"

"I'm trying to decide if I should be insulted."

"I agree with you and now you're insulted? Way to be difficult, Yagami-kun."

" *I'm* being difficult?"

Matt picked up his mostly empty bowl and drank down the leftover milk. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. "Well, yeah. But it's okay. That's your usual state of being."

"Now I'm convinced I should be insulted," Yagami said, but he was smiling a crooked sort of half-smile.

"Boo-hoo. Come on, I want a rematch."

The teen perked up. "Tennis?"

"No, shuffle board. What do you think?"

Yagami ignored Matt's sarcastic barb. "I know a club we can play at; I used to play on the same team as the owner's son."

"Great. Let's go," Matt said getting to his feet. He glanced around the room looking for his shoes.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Yagami asked bemusedly.

"Huh?" Matt turned back to Yagami. The teen smirked and gestured at Matt's clothing.

Matt looked down at himself. It took far too long for his brain to register what Light was getting at. He was still wearing yesterday's clothes. Ah, well. They weren't that dirty. It was fine. He went back to looking for his shoes.

"Greene-kun, what are you doing?"

"Looking for my shoes. Obviously."

"Go take a shower and get changed, Greene-kun."

"Who died and made you my mother, Yagami- *kun* ?"

Yagami grimaced. "I am not going anywhere with you until you're presentable."

Matt stared. "We're just going to get sweaty while we play. What the fuck does it matter?"

"It's... You... *decency* - "

"What has decency ever done for me?" Matt slumped against the counter.

"Then we can stay here all day."

That was not an option. "Really, Yagami?" Matt demanded. "I thought you were above this sort of thing."

"And I thought you could handle being in public. Clearly I was wrong."

Matt scowled. "Fine. Whatever. Neat Freak. You win. I'll go wash up. Try not to burn the place down. And don't *touch* anything." With that Matt stomped over to his room, threw open the door, grabbed some mostly clean clothes, and stomped over to the bathroom. He slammed the door behind himself and locked it. What a day this was turning out to be.

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(1) Real Analysis is basically a high-level mathematics course on the theory behind calculus among other things.

I did not plan the discussion of World War II in the Pacific Theater. It just happened as a natural consequence of using the Homeland Security Act as a time stamp. Matt and Light insisted. I did my best to handle it well. But it's very possible that I failed in that. If so I apologize. It is true that most Japanese young people know very little about the atrocities committed by Japan during that war. From what I understand, this is because of what they're taught or not taught in school. Light did some extra-curricular studying which is why he has a somewhat more educated and nuanced view of things. And, well, it's completely consistent with his typical disgust at humanity for being rotten to the core.

Anyway, how was the chapter? What does Light think he's doing? How is Matt going to cover the gaping holes in his cover story? I'd love to hear your thoughts!

Constructive criticism is always appreciated. Hearing from all of you always brightens my day and reminds me why I write!

Take care!

-blackash